

2010

Kunapipi 32 (1&2) 2010 Full Version

Anne Collett

University of Wollongong, acollett@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Collett, Anne, Kunapipi 32 (1&2) 2010 Full Version, *Kunapipi*, 32(2), 2010.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol32/iss2/1>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

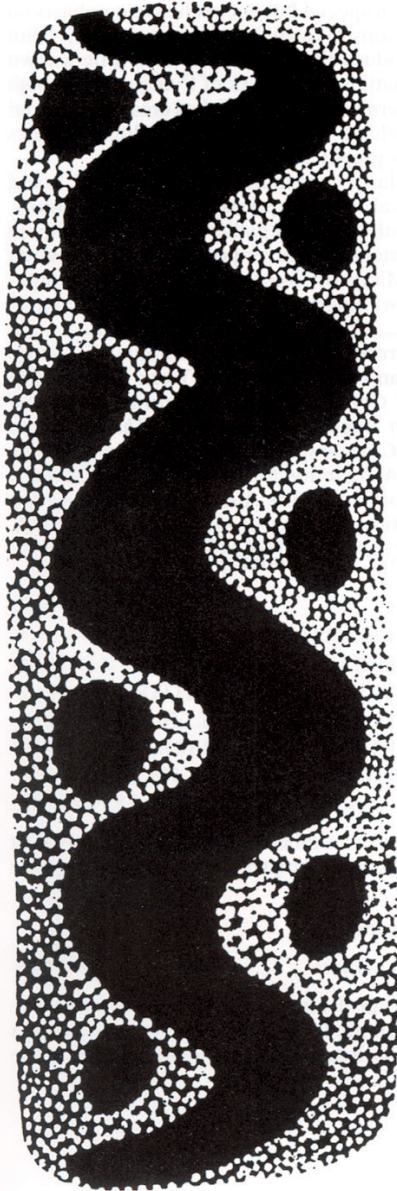
Kunapipi 32 (1&2) 2010 Full Version

Abstract

Full text of issue. For individual articles see: ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol32/iss1/

KUNAPIPI

Journal of Postcolonial Writing & Culture



VOLUME XXXII NUMBER 1-2
2010

Kunapipi is a biannual arts magazine with special but not exclusive emphasis on the new literatures written in English. It aims to fulfil the requirements T.S. Eliot believed a journal should have: to introduce the work of new or little known writers of talent, to provide critical evaluation of the work of living authors, both famous and unknown, and to be truly international. It publishes creative material and criticism. Articles and reviews on related historical and sociological topics plus film will also be included as well as graphics and photographs.

The editor invites creative and scholarly contributions. The editorial board does not necessarily endorse any political views expressed by its contributors. Manuscripts should be double-spaced with notes gathered at the end, and should conform to the Harvard (author-date) system. Submissions should be in the form of a Word or Rich Text Format file sent by email attachment to acollett@uow.edu.au. Image files should be high resolution tif format and submitted on compact disc if larger than 1mb. Please include a short biography, address and email contact.

Kunapipi is an internationally refereed journal of postcolonial literature formally acknowledged by the Australian National Library. All articles are double-blind peer reviewed. Work published in *Kunapipi* is cited in *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature's Annual Bibliography* (UK), *The Year's Work in English Studies* (UK), *The Grahamstown Information Journal* (SA), *Australian Literary Studies*, *The Indian Association for Commonwealth Studies* (India), *The New Straits Times* (Indonesia), *The Australian Public Affairs Information Service* (produced by the National Library of Australia) and the *MLA*.

All correspondence (manuscripts, inquiries, subscriptions) should be sent to:

Dr. Anne Collett
Editor — *KUNAPIPI*
English Literatures Program
University of Wollongong
Wollongong NSW 2522
Australia

SUBSCRIPTION RATES

| | | |
|---------------|--------|--------------|
| Individual: | 1 year | AUD \$60.00 |
| Institutions: | 1 year | AUD \$130.00 |

Please note that if payment is made in currencies other than AUD\$, the equivalent of \$10.00 must be added to cover banking costs. Cheques should be made payable to Kunapipi Publishing.

Internet: <http://www.kunapipi.com>

Copyright © remains with the individual authors.

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of private study, research, criticism or review as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced without written permission. Enquiries should be made to the editor.

© December 2010.

ISSN 0106-5734

Kunapipi

VOLUME XXXII NUMBER 1–2, 2010

Editor

ANNE COLLETT

Sub-Editor

GREG RATCLIFFE

Editorial Advisors

DIANA BRYDON, ISABEL CARRERA SUÁREZ, KEE THUAN CHYE, DIANA WOOD CONROY, MARGARET DAYMOND, HELEN GILBERT, GARETH GRIFFITHS, ALAMGIR HASHMI, ARITHA VAN HERK, JANIS JEFFRIES, SUE KOSSEW, ALAN LAWSON, RUSSELL MCDOUGALL, ALASTAIR NIVEN, KIRSTEN HOLST PERTERSEN, CHRIS PRENTICE, BRUCE CLUNIES ROSS, PAUL SHARRAD, KIRPAL SINGH, ANGELA SMITH, HELEN TIFFIN, GERRY TURCOTTE, JAMES WIELAND, MARK WILLIAMS

Production

GREG RATCLIFFE

Five-Year Subscriptions Tribute to Anna



| | |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| Sonja Bahn | Isabel Carrera |
| Jeanne Delbaere | Helen Gilbert |
| Zeny Giles | Gareth Griffiths |
| Bernard Hickey | Dorothy Jones |
| Paul Love | Russell McDougall |
| Hena Maes-Jelinek | Jamie Scott |
| Paul Sharrad | Jennifer Strauss |
| Chris Tiffin | Helen Tiffin |
| Adi Wimmer | |

Acknowledgements

Kunapipi is published with assistance from the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies and the European branch of the Association and the Faculty of Arts University of Wollongong.

EACLALS

European Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies

The excerpt from Cyril Wong's poem, *Satori Blues: A Poem* (Softblow Press, Singapore 2011), is reproduced with permission of the author.

Chandran Nair's poems have been reproduced from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)* (Ethos Books, Singapore 2010) with permission of the author.

Merlinda Bobis' short story has been previously published in *Heat*, 5, (1997) and in *White Turtle* (Spinfex: North Melbourne, 1999). It is reprinted here with permission of the author and with revisions by the author.

Front Cover:

Mai Nguyen-Long, *Keala* (2008), papier mâché mongrel dog (avian mesh frame), 85 x 40 x 46cm, (courtesy of the artist and Casula Powerhouse), one of the twelve imaginary mongrels created by the artist for the installation, *Pho Dog*.

Kunapipi refers to the Australian Aboriginal myth of the Rainbow Serpent which is the symbol of both creativity and regeneration. The journal's emblem is to be found on an Aboriginal shield from the Roper River area of the Northern Territory of Australia.

Contents

| | |
|--|---------------------------|
| Editorial, <i>Anne Collett</i> | vii |
| ARTICLES | |
| <i>Paul Sharrad</i> , 'Sang Kanchil Meets Sime Darby: Drawing New Postcolonial Boundaries in the Asia-Pacific' | 9 |
| <i>Shakila Abdul Manan</i> , 'Going against the Grain: Postcolonial Writings and Creative Performance in Malaysia' | 30 |
| <i>Sohaimi Abdul Aziz</i> , 'The Development of the Popular Malay Cult Novel' | 61 |
| <i>Ruzy Suliza Hashim & Shahizah Ismail Hamdan</i> , 'Facets of Women in Malay Romance Fiction' | 67 |
| <i>Rodney C. Jubilado</i> , 'On Cultural Fluidity: The Sama-Bajau of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas' | 89 |
| <i>Robyn Morris</i> , 'Relations of Difference: Asianness, Indigeneity and Whiteness in Simone Lazaroo's Fiction' | 116 |
| <i>Chi Vu</i> , 'The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator' | 130 |
| <i>Boitran Huynh-Beattie</i> , 'Less Seen Art, Made by Vietnamese-Australian Artists' | 147 |
| <i>Michael Jacklin</i> , 'Southeast Asian Writing in Australia: The Case of Vietnamese Writing' | 175 |
| <i>Dolores Herrero</i> , 'Merlinda Bobis's <i>Banana Heart Summer</i> : Recipes to Work through Trauma and Appease the Human Heart's Everlasting Hunger' | 194 |
| <i>Merlinda Bobis & Dolores Herrero</i> , 'Sensing and Sensibility: The Late Ripple of Colonisation?' | 225 |
| FICTION | |
| <i>Merlinda Bobis</i> , 'Fish-Hair Woman' | 209 |
| <i>Merlinda Bobis</i> , 'Mujer Pelo-Pez' | 217 |
| POETRY | |
| <i>Cyril Wong</i> , 'excerpt from <i>Satori Blues</i> ' | 102 |
| <i>Chandran Nair</i> , 'after the hard hours this rain', 'grandfather', 'for laura', 'cenotaph', 'dry words' | 111, 112 113, 114, 115 |
| <i>Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt</i> , 'Speech of a Poet', 'Diện văn cửa thơ' | 165, 166 |

| | |
|---|----------------------|
| <i>Trần Lộc Bình</i> , ‘The Poet’, ‘Nhà Thơ’ | 167, 169 |
| <i>Phan Quỳnh Trâm</i> , ‘On Words’, ‘On Words (The Reverse)’, Dấu/Chữ, Dấu/Chữ (Ngược lại) | 171, 172 173, 174 |
| <i>Uyên Nguyên</i> , ‘Two Variations on the Columns “Making Friends” and “Short Messages”’, ‘Hai biến khúc từ mục kết bạn và nhắn tin’ | 184 189 |
| INTERVIEWS | |
| <i>Mohammad A. Quayum</i> , ‘Introducing Huzir Sulaiman: A Malaysian Playwright’ | 45 |
| REVIEW ESSAYS | |
| <i>Md. Salleh Yaapar</i> , ‘The Empire Strikes Back: Re-Writing Malay History and Identity in Faisal Tehrani’s Novel, <i>1515</i> ’ | 80 |
| <i>Kirpal Singh</i> , ‘Poetic Meditations: Two Singaporean Poets and a Personal Reflection’ | 105 |
| ABSTRACTS | 242 |
| NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS | 247 |
| NOTES ON EDITORIAL ADVISORS | 252 |

EDITORIAL

As Paul Sharrad explains at the beginning of his article (rather mysteriously entitled, ‘Sang Kanchil meets Sime Darby’), this issue grew out of an invitation to scholars of Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Wollongong to attend a conference at the Universiti Sains Malaysia on Postcolonial Literature of the Asia-Pacific region. Some of the articles in the issue are versions of papers given at the conference (in September 2010), but I took this opportunity to expand from what was primarily a Malaysian nucleus into the larger region that I have nominated ‘South-East Asia’ (including within these covers, Vietnam, Singapore, The Philippines and The Sulu-Sulawesi Seas).

I was surprised at how little I knew about the literature of the region in which I live, even of the literature produced within my own country — in part because so much of the literature written and performed in languages other than English in Australia is ‘less seen’ (in Boitran Huynh-Beattie’s words) and ‘less heard’. Yet not only oral cultures, but literary cultures in numerous languages are a vibrant part of a nation that is mistakenly perceived to be monolingual (by outsiders, but also by a large portion of its citizens). This is a nation of indigenous peoples who spoke many languages (although many of them are now spoken by very few), and a nation of migrants many of whom speak a language in addition to English, or if they do not, have a parent or grandparent who does.

Although I speak and read only English with any fluency, I grew up hearing Greek, Italian, Chinese and unexpectedly perhaps, Latvian. The vocabulary of music lessons was Italian, and the language of ballet lessons, French. French was also the language of choice during the years of my high school education, German coming in well behind in second place, something that changed radically during the period of my own children’s education in which Asian languages dominated. I have also been a member of a choir for most of my life, the words of the music sung in a huge range of languages; so yes I am ‘monolingual’, but no, the everyday world I inhabit is not and never has been.

What I did not realise was the extent of literature published in Australia, written in languages other than English. Particularly exciting then is the publication in this issue of work by Vietnamese Australian poets, in the language of their composition — Vietnamese, and in the language of translation, English. *Trần Lộc Binh* speaks of the poet, ‘confined in the prison of words’ and when he is utterly desperate, he attempts suicide:

He put his head into the noose dangling from the ceiling of the cell
The noose was braided with words, including many foreign words
He was not dead

The poet resolves to eat himself, from the bottom up — ‘legs, groin, abdomen ...’ — until only his head remains — but what to do? ‘He cannot bite, chew and swallow his nose, eyes, ears, forehead, chin, nape and skull’, but he can eat his

lips and tongue. Now he is scared for the first time for even if he eats his lips and tongue he is still not dead and not dead means ‘He will continue to live with a head made of words, scrawny, lonely and silent’. A head full of silent words — words that cannot be spoken or heard is a scary thought — a lonely thought. So the poet decides he must keep his lips ‘to smile and kiss (if possible)’ (these actions do not require words but might alleviate the poet’s loneliness); and he decides he must keep his tongue, ‘To talk, cry and swear, when necessary’. The poet must utter. Whether we hear him or her is a matter of listening, whether we understand, is a matter of translation. Some words require more translation than others. All translation requires effort and the desire for connection.

Many of the contributions to this issue of *Kunapipi* reveal, in the words of Dolores Herrero, how the multiple histories that circulate in different societies or communities ‘overlap, intersect and compete with one another’:

They can be neither fused into a singular national (or any other kind of) narrative nor completely separated from one another or from their own particular contexts. Hence the need to create ethical discourses that incorporate the stories, desires and frustrations of the multitude of people who make up this global *communitas*. (238)

I hope that *Kunapipi* is a kind of *communitas*, and I here thank all the people who work to make it such: thank you to Greg Ratcliffe, Carmel Pass, Gerard Toomey, Sarah-Jane Burton, and all the academics who so willingly give their time to participate in the (unpaid but much appreciated) scholarly review process.

Anne Collett

PAUL SHARRAD

Sang Kanchil meets Sime Darby: Drawing New Postcolonial Boundaries in the Asia-Pacific

This paper has its origins in a request to think about postcolonial studies in the context of a literary conference in Malaysia, prompting the following review of the field and how it is changing, with thoughts on how it might apply to some of the social issues in what was generally set up as ‘the Asia Pacific region’. In general, postcolonial studies has always been about analysis of ‘difference management’ within a utopian project of correcting prejudicial discriminations in the operations of power, grounded on a sense of the rights of groups of people to self determination and equity — not equality as uniformity, but rather the valued existence of a community in terms appropriate to its own as sense of self and its social context. From Hegel and then Freud onwards, this has been figured in terms of both ‘master-servant’ and ‘self-other’ relationships, with the progressive unpacking of just how one term is enmeshed in the other, and how both might be or, despite appearances, always are, unstable formations amenable to change. Robert Young expressed the project of postcolonial studies succinctly when he asked: ‘How can we know *and* respect the other?’ (14) or, how can we allow the other to *be* the other and still find ways of building community with it?

Difference management has been modelled in postcolonial theory in three ways, with a shift of critique from the first to the third item in the following list:

imperialist/classical: assimilation/exclusion

liberal/modernist: universalism/relativism

ambiguous/postmodernist: interactive systems of differentials.

Of course, elements of each mode exist within the historical and social spaces corresponding to the dominance of any one item. In that mix, postcolonial theory splits according to whether it sees power operating as oppositional resistance (a largely materialist/Marxist/activist grouping) or as deconstructive subversion (mainly a textual/postmodern/theoretical position). Insofar as these are distinct camps (and there are always interactions and crossovers), one can think of the first as including Epifanio San Juan Jr, Benita Parry, Neil Lazarus and Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the latter Bill Ashcroft, Homi Bhabha, R. Radhakrishnan and Wilson Harris, with Edward Said hovering across the two, and Spivak’s idea of ‘strategic essentialism’ as allowing an activist practice to cohabit with deconstructive theory.

In the particular area of literary studies, and in the proliferation from that into cultural studies, the focus of analysis has always been on the cultural politics of

production, of representation, and of reception — the politics of language, the ways texts carry culture, the opening up of the traditional canon to difference and the critique of the values on which it has excluded the new and the non-Eurocentric.

In speaking ‘truth to power’ as Foucault puts it, postcolonial critics also have to be aware of the imbrication of power with truth, and, as Spivak points out, examine who we are and where we stand to pronounce the critical word, and try to see how that shapes what and how we speak about whom (‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’). This is the profession of difference that postcolonial literary studies brings to traditional cultural thinking: its knowledge is always situated; it is not a disinterested appreciation and explication of supposedly universal truths. Cultural production is historically and politically determined, as is analysis of it.

An Australian is able to attend a conference in Malaysia because: (a) the countries share a common — but not identical — history as former colonies of Britain; and because (b) they are part of a movement of globalising capital that converts higher education into a market commodity and has everyone competing for international market share and seeking alliances to empower our respective university systems against historically dominant centres of cultural capital (the Sorbonne, Oxbridge, the Ivy League) and emergent centres of economic power (China) (see Davis). The Australian may also be attending because several governments in Australia have under-funded higher education on the dubious premiss that students are clients and should buy product that will enhance their ability to earn and thereby pay back the value of what they learn, and that universities can sell such product to the richer sections of overseas countries. There are some real neo-colonialist assumptions here about a hierarchised global education system in which Australia thinks it is better because it has closer historical connections to Oxbridge and to the US by virtue of being an Anglo-Celtic settler colony, plus some cheap pragmatism that says it can offer more or less the same product at less cost than Britain and America. A postcolonial analysis would be looking at this situation to question some Vice-Chancellors hell-bent on modelling their institutions on American higher education, asking them what (and where) they mean by ‘the best’ when they suggest that managerial commodity education administration in Australia will bring it from some mediocre periphery to being equal to some other superlative centre, and just how that is different from the old colonial cultural cringe that marginalised Australian culture relative to Britain’s. Postcolonial critics might also seek out how international collaborations might be genuinely equitable dialogues for mutual learning rather than exploitative ventures carrying vestiges of late-imperialist thinking.

This writer has to admit that he went to Penang because he is the colonial great-grandchild of that city. I was born in Adelaide, South Australia under the shadow of Colonel William Light. He planned my home city, renowned for its belt of parkland, regular squared streets and five parkland squares (with Victoria

Square being the central one ruled over by a statue of Her Imperial majesty and a couple of settler explorers). This plan (whether Light knew it or not) is a model with a deep colonial history going back at least to the 1600s where it was used as a defensive grid for another colony in America, and that was in turn based on Roman imperial grids for military camps that later became a standard medieval plan for gardens. So I grew up in a town famous for being orderly and free (no convicts, many churches) whose civic order postcolonial analysis reveals to stem from imperial military systems and allegories of the perfect city with a garden of Eden enclosed at its heart (McLeod 197). William Light, as many readers will know — unless nationalist narrativising of the past has erased colonial traces — was the son of Francis Light, a minor functionary of Empire who thought Penang island would make a fine maritime trading centre on the global spice route, and unilaterally obliged Britain to make good his vision. Such common differences make us companions in an uneasy history of perceived power differentials that include a post-colonial relay of race policies, regional alliances and misalliances, economic trade, military involvements and global media imageries.

Postcolonial critique has over time turned its attention from one topic to another as decolonisation and then globalisation have taken hold, again without completely replacing the dynamics they move through and past:

empire/colony

nation/community

globe/nation

humanity/globe.

Although the field developed largely out of the post-World War Two period of decolonisation and national formation, it does not confine itself to a definition of post-colonial as meaning ‘after independence’, since the dynamics of national opposition to external imperialism do not cease with the raising of a flag. On the one hand, economic modes of transnational imperial power survive political change; on the other, nations tend to reproduce the centre-periphery structures, elite interests and assimilationist goals of colonial systems, so that postcolonial analysis still has a role in critiquing internal inequities and suppressions of difference.

One suppression I am particularly interested in is the geo-political formation of the Asia-Pacific Region. Whether it is the UN, the Australian government or an English Department in Malaysia using the term, ‘Asia-Pacific’ generally means ‘Pacific Rim’, and most often means ‘Asia’. At least in terms of a sense of literary-cultural community, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand and Indonesia might be part of the broad region, but they are not really part of the Pacific. Mohammad Haji Salleh has made an excellent study of ‘the binding threads that have been woven to make the common textile of races and cultures in the region’ (3), but these threads do not tie in the Pacific further than Flores and the Philippines. Australia itself is both connected to and distant from the Pacific, depending on which coast

one lives on and whether the government is looking east, west or north according to the winds of political and economic convenience. The Asia-Pacific boundary is also constantly redrawn depending on regional interests.

There are, of course, Asia-Pacific contacts going back into pre-modernity: the transmission of proto-Malay language eastwards through Polynesia; the transmission of indigenous Taiwanese DNA southwards through Polynesia; ancient cycles of trepang gathering linking Makasar and northern Australia; the colonial movements of labour from Indonesia to New Caledonia, from Japan to pearling sites in northern Australia, from China to small trade stores right through the Pacific. But if we look for a genuine Asia-Pacific of contemporary relations, we are faced with new challenges for postcolonial studies. On the one hand, there is the erasure of the Pacific 'Basin' from the largely economic-based Asia-Pacific 'Rim', and on the other, there is the imperialist exploitation of the Pacific Islands by Asia. In fact, the two apparent opposites go together in the logic of colonialist discourse. The psychoanalytic and discourse analysis studies stemming from Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon and running through Homi Bhabha and others, point to denial and disparaging stereotypes as means of covering and justifying what is done to maintain privilege and take advantage of marginal spaces by those with more power. In modern times, there are new sites of postcolonial struggle in Polynesia, where Taiwan and Japan sign development deals that cover their depletion of fish stocks, and in Melanesia, where Asia meets Pacific in the exploitative extraction of timber.

If we look at writing from the Pacific, we find Islanders lamenting the depredations on natural resources in the same oral-based declamatory voice as they protested against colonial discriminations and labour exploitations earlier. Alfred Ghere Liligeto, for example, has several poems about the rape of his Solomon Islands natural resources ('Intrusion', *We the Villagers* 30) and the need to 'be good stewards/ let us not poison the earth' (*We the Villagers* 59). The focus for his complaint is clear:

Logging

They came in great numbers
Like the gold rushes of old
People from everywhere
They came by boats and planes
With money and machinery
To cut down our trees
And extract our timber

Some applied, accepted and came.
Some applied, refused but came.
Some came by the back door:
Some came by the front door
With promises of 'development'
To cut down our trees

And extract our timber
Landowners were excited
Government willing support
Said 'yes!' to 'development'
For children's future guaranteed.
But what future is there
When they cut down our trees
And extract our future?

They cut our trees down
And extract our timber
Leaving habitat clear and bare.
They cut our trees down
And dozer our lands free
To make themselves rich
From what little we have.

Man of the land!
Government of the day!
Think not only for today!
But think also of tomorrow!
Your future.
Your security...
Lie in your trees and forests. (*We the Villagers* 28–29).

And here is Willie Tekahota about a decade later:

Loggers

For only
a carton of beer,
we give away
our lives
our trees
our soil
our water
our ecology.

Bulldozers
interesting to watch:
fast, heavy, noisy.
But truth lies
behind the back wheels:
packed soil
felled trees
polluted water
limited oxygen
dead animals.

Will we be rich?
Two per cent
is ours.
Ninety-eight percent

is theirs.
 Beware of the loggers
 who come in yellow skin.
 They are cheating deceivers,
 selfish and bloodthirsty. (*Raetemaot*, 64)

It is not just the land, but the ocean and the local population as well that is being encroached upon, as Jully Sipolo (Makini) records:

Okinawa Fishermen

There's a strange ship at Labete
 Weird music blares across
 Raucous laughter
 Who are they?
 Foreigners.

Short stunted pygmy-like
 Black stiff sea-urchin hair
 Sickly yellow skin
 Half moon eyes
 Okinawa fishermen.

Strolling through the village
 Looking out of place
 Clad in woollen jerseys
 And track-suit trousers
 Expensive radios
 To impress the local lasses
 Okinawa fishermen.

Are they accepted?
 There is division among the people
 Some for — some against
 Many more on the fence
 But there are half-castes now
 Planted by
 Okinawa fishermen. (*Civilized Girl* 5)

The racial representations here are of interest as a kind of reversal of colonialist imagery, and it is perhaps worth noting the yellow skin is not specifically associated with East Asians; any skin tone lighter than the blue black of a Solomons or Vanuatu islander is either red or yellow. More recently, Celo Kulagoe creates an allegory in which the totemic eagle is threatened by the rapacity of an unspecified vulture:

Beware, O eagle,
 the vulture is no young chick
 dim-eyed
 weak-beaked
 slow feathered
 to tether to your nest.

Beware that silent poise
of flight
that death-wish stare
the screeching tongue
and greedy claws
clutching all in sight
for her own brood.

Noble eagle
perch higher on your true mountain
vigilant over the valleys
soaring the plains.

Your air is no longer free
but full of crossing flights
by the defiant poaching vulture.

Beware, O eagle.
Beware the vulture. ('Beware the Vulture', *Raindrops*, 39)

Jully Makinis like many others, shows critical awareness that vultures are often invited in by unthinking self-interest. Her poem 'Boeing — Going, Gone' attacks the small-island Pacific nations' rush to acquire international airlines. They deplete inter-island shipping 'too remote to go where the dollar is', bring in tourists who turn local traditions into curiosities, drain local talent who get access to bigger neighbouring countries, and 'provide ... ego trips for the elite' (*Flotsam & Jetsam* 4). Nonetheless, the overall criticism of neo-imperialist exploitation of the natural resources of the Pacific by outsiders and globalised commerce is clear.

Some of that outside commerce of extraction is based in Malaysia. Rimbunan Hijau, for example, plays a major role in PNG and Vanuatu where, despite evident improvements in civil infrastructure in some places and national income generally, tribal cooperatives return 4 to 10 times the royalties paid by international corporations whose presence has propelled a rapacious extraction of timbers, 70% of which according to the World Bank is illegal. Accusations of human rights abuse, pollution and political corruption have been levelled at the logging industry, and even Rimbunan Hijau's own records show 2.7 million Kina as 'miscellaneous payments'. Postcolonial critique might investigate cultural vectors behind this phenomenon: whether this means corruption or whether it reflects a local practice of gift exchange; whether the competitive 'big man' culture of Melanesia inclines some villagers to sell off communal capital in a generally accepted ethos of get-rich-quick, or whether they are alienated from traditions of collectivity and sustainable relations with their natural environment by manipulative outside influence (Firth et al, *Friends of the Earth PNG*, Rimbunan Hijau).

A postcolonial critique might ask to what extent this inter-regional dynamic of erasure and exploitation is a result of the ongoing legacy of colonial discourses, in the hope that dismantling (that is, exposing and de-constructing) them might correct impositions and inequities. There has been a long contest over the boundary of the

hyphen in post-colonial which works to corral scholarly attention into historical 'before' and 'after' camps and national state cultural spaces, but it is not unknown for countries fighting free of colonialism to internalise and then project onto others the dynamic they have become part of through resistance and nationalist assertion: the Israeli state is a case in point in relation to displacing its history of resistance to Britain and Europe onto oppression of the Palestinian people. And the history of self-determination blinds those involved to how they have turned into what they once opposed. Equally, being confined by the boundary of the nation obscures inequities and impositions within and beyond national borders. There is opportunity for critical engagement here by writers and scholars. To what extent has a postcolonial nationalist opposition to Western imperialism in Southeast Asia allowed the recuperation of colonial attitudes towards other less developed parts of the region? Has the binary of 'corrupt West versus pure Islam' that is a product of postcolonial histories resulted in a racist attitude towards dark-skinned, non-Islamic peoples? Do the two desert-based cultures of Judeo-Christianity and Islam share a romanticised attitude to forests grounded in deep-rooted distrust such that their cultural legatees seek to possess it and destroy it as they create their 'garden' plantations? And again, are the attitudes and policies of new nations born of the attitudes and discourses of colonial forebears, even when their citizens try to distance themselves from them?

It is an uncomfortable question and maybe one that only a crude outsider can ask, but outsiders too are complicit in their own question. Colonisation is the displacement and/or dispossession of a pre-existing population by the incursion of another group. Imperialism is the subordination of a number of peoples and locations to the interests of another power. In Australian history, both modes can be seen in operation: the colonial dispossession of Aborigines by British settlement and the subordination of white colonists to the interests of the British Empire. White Australians, treated as second-class citizens of Empire, learned in their turn how to disparage and dominate the indigenous inhabitants with that greater degree of intensity born of shame and anger. They also looked at the Pacific as a place of savage otherness that confirmed their superiority as whites, sent out missionaries, grabbed island labour for Queensland sugar plantations and took over rule of Papua New Guinea as second-level imperialists, extracting profits from copra plantations, eventually, coffee and cacao, and mining. The only saving grace historically was that there were not many people available or willing to colonise the harsh terrain, so contact was not completely devastating, and that the UN forced local development towards independence in a relatively productive and peaceful manner.

The point here is that the various modes of postcolonial studies are not confined to assessing the workings and outcomes of nineteenth-century European imperial expansion across the globe. Nor are they confined to simplistic labelling of good and bad. Increasingly, they also have to redraw the literary boundary and

the nation boundary in order to continue the kind of analysis of power and cultural politics postcolonial studies take as their *raison d'être*. Postcolonial critics have to analyse the investments, conflicts, often unintended effects and relative merits of all parties interested in any situation. This has led to critiques of racial and ethnic difference being redirected to analysis of the border between humans and nature, a border that carries traces of colonialist and neo-imperialist discourses, and an ecocritical space that until recently, as Rob Nixon has noted, was dominated by an un-self-reflective First World scholarship. Nixon was writing in 2005 and mainly from a US context, but his model of differences between postcolonial and ecocritical focuses is a fair summation:

| <u>Postcolonial</u> | <u>Ecocritical</u> |
|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Hybridity (culture) | purity (nature) |
| displacement | place |
| national | transnational |
| border histories | timeless communion. (235) |

Some of these contrasts are overstating the case and no longer valid. Postcolonial studies, for example, although it has been mainly a field of comparative national literatures centred around deconstructing the Western canon and its hegemonic epistemologies, has always been aware of the transnational dynamic of imperial power. It is true, however, that while it has examined discourses of the natural, it has treated them as a tool within a human-centred apparatus of representational controls. Ecocriticism challenges the postcolonial to redraw its boundaries by focusing more on the natural world and to recuperate some of the universalism jettisoned under rubrics of incommensurable cultural difference, while postcolonial studies calls ecocriticism to account for its perpetuation of romantic transcendentalism and 'spatial amnesia' (Nixon 236) that carry cultural ethnocentrism and colonial legacies. As Nixon notes: '[o]nce cultures have been discursively assimilated to nature (not least through the settler tradition of viewing the United States as "nature's nation"), they have been left more vulnerable to dispossession — whether in the name of virgin wilderness preservation or the creation of nuclear test zones' (235). The last point connects very clearly to the use and misuse of the Pacific; the first to the treatment of indigenous peoples, whether in Australia, the Solomon Islands or Borneo. If environmental critique looks for an 'ethics of place' (Nixon 236), postcolonialism seeks an 'ethics of community' and if one invokes Derrida's binaries and the Self/Other formulations of Said and Bhabha, then the two terms are mutually constitutive and full understanding of one requires examination of the other.

For example, a well meaning photo compilation of pristine nature across the globe distributed by Greenpeace as a reward to its regular supporters features the panoramic beauty of forests and the stirring appeal of furry creatures like bears and orang-utans, but the only humans it shows are Africans, Mongolian-Siberians and Amazonian natives being traditional and unspoiled. The photographers are

European and the presumed audience is a well-off global middle class who are being told to look upon certain indigenous minorities as quaint and colourful and one with nature and nature as something sublime that has to be fenced off for pleasurable touristic contemplation. There is no reflective examination of the producers' world and the commodity culture that enmeshes its readers in the destruction implied, and no interest in modernising sustainability that might offer the people depicted better living conditions and put them in a position to engage the world in equitable dialogue rather than being looked at from afar (Mauthe & Henningsen). The intent is clearly honourable; the discursive effects are at least open to question. Nixon calls for a postcolonial rethinking of pastoral in 'writing that refracts an idealized nature through memories of environmental and cultural degradation in the colonies' (239) and postcolonial critics like Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin (*Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, 2009) have begun to redraw the boundaries of what is already a pluri-disciplinary field to incorporate ecocritical awareness.

There are as well interesting analyses still to be done of some of the disregarded corners of colonial textual history. I am not sure adequate consideration has yet been given to the particularities of British relations with and representations of Malaya. Australian colonial-era literary connections have been mostly as a result of contacts during war, but it is interesting to note that two novels depict the country as a place of romance: Nora Barry's 1940's *Love in Malaya*, and G.M. Glaskin's *The Beach of Passionate Love: Pantai Cinta Berahi* (1961). These fall into a generic potboiler formula, but readings of colonialism, at least in literary studies, are still very much dominated by scholarship on India and Africa, and this may have the effect of distorting the way in which national discourses since have been configured. The emphasis on cultural difference that has energised postcolonial literary studies has also kept our attention (for very good reasons) on communal relations across and within nations, ethnicities and languages, with critical focus, but focus nonetheless, on English. But there are also important ongoing effects and spin-offs to attend to. We can ask ourselves how the sub-discipline of postcolonial studies has developed and how we might further apply its critical apparatus today in our own region.

One criticism levelled at postcolonial studies is that its origins in departments of English under the rubric of Commonwealth Literature has perpetuated a limiting focus on Anglophone expression (the basis of Amitav Ghosh's refusal of his nomination for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize). This boundary does need to be broken open, but that does not entirely do away with language-based challenges to work more effectively. Agnes Yeow notes that scholars working in the field of Malaysian literature tend to categorise and segregate their pursuits along linguistic lines (Yeow 124). It would be interesting to know the kinds of discussions that occur amongst writers and critics across all the areas of expression in Malaysia and in particular between English Departments and colleagues in

Bahasa and Islamic studies. Prof. Haji Salleh has made cogent critiques of the global hegemony of English but has also done valuable work in promoting local writing by translating Malay texts into English. Given the postcolonial debates over the use of English as a colonial supplanter of vernaculars (see, for example, Harry Aveling's discussion of translation internationally), one may wonder about the repeated phrase in the Koran where the narrator says (I paraphrase) 'I give you these words in your own tongue so that you may readily understand'. How does this, and the attitudes it presumably has induced in native speakers of Arabic towards people far away who do not speak it as a matter of course, relate to cultural production in Malaysia or Indonesia? Is a postcolonial critical apparatus of any use in such a context?

In a post-national world of global flows of knowledge, capital and labour, postcolonial studies has necessarily had to grapple with the dynamics of globalisation. From one perspective, the decentred postmodern network of global movements seems to make postcolonial models outmoded, and yet, nations and nationalisms still drive much of people's social and cultural lives, and societies are not just colonised by people and politics; nor has globalisation suddenly leapt upon us in the 1980s. From Vasco DaGama and even Marco Polo, and indeed, from the *bunga emas* in exchange for China's porcelain and token protection, and the exchange of Hindu-Buddhist culture for pepper, global movements of money and produce have been part of imperial outreach. This has involved colonisation by plants as well as people. In a recent paper I looked at the export of Australia's gum trees and wattles across the globe mentioned in Murray Bail's novel, *Eucalyptus* (Sharrad 2007), and we can think of other commodities — indigo, subject of the first protest play in India, *Nil Darpan*, tea, coffee, the breadfruit of the Pacific to the Caribbean, sugar, not to mention rubber, and the topic of Amitav Ghosh's latest novel *Sea of Poppies*, opium.

Consideration of the sources of Malaysia's economic interests in the Pacific, leads to thinking about how its own landscape has been colonised by plants and how its indigenous fauna and tribes have been displaced as a result. First under colonialism, rubber replaced the varied species of the tropical forest and tin mines made holes in the ground and damaged waterways. One of the boundaries being redrawn in the ecology movement is that between the humanities and geography. Lesley Head notes that 'human-plant geographies have been less commented on than human-animal geographies' (236) and looks at how plants, like animals, can evoke affective responses from humans, and how some plants are categorised as having 'charisma' (ancient trees, colourful flowering bushes, orchids) as opposed to other taken for granted species (237). Some are considered 'alien' and invasive, and others 'native' and 'good', even when they are invasive (240).

In colonial Malaya, the young resident in Pahang, Hugh Clifford, recorded his adventures and yarns gleaned from locals. In doing so he established a literary world of human relations to nature in which the tiger features as a physical and

magical danger, elephants and wild buffalo get mentions too. Plants abound, but are a largely unspecified backdrop labelled simply 'forest' or 'jungle'. The jungle can shelter those who submit to its rules, it can provide sporadic trade products, and it can be a major obstacle to human endeavour. In general plant nature and rivers are represented as a romantic realm of silence housing 'Sakai' and other aboriginal tribes. The stories celebrate the natural world but record the increasing incursions on its space by Malay traders and Chinese and European miners and indeed by colonial officers such as the author himself. Philip Holden has made a detailed study of Clifford's writing, tracing modern national discourses of self-regulation and masculinist discipline in Singapore and Malaysia (138) back to Victorian values and British colonial education. There is much to criticise in the racist representations of Clifford's writing, which still stands as a useful working model of colonialist discourse, but Holden has concentrated on race and gender, British and Malay, and recent shifts in the focus of postcolonial studies, also allow inspection of the colonial archive to see how it has sedimented attitudes to animals and nature that perhaps influence how people behave today.

Holden clearly shows how Clifford's writing depicts the Malay as lazy, dreamy (latah) and prone to run amok (95–106); the male is a dandy within a medieval code of chivalry/honour (53–64); women are objects of exchange, victims of the harem, domestic drudges, venal opportunists (81–84). There is a racial/class hierarchy of white colonial officers, white traders, rajahs, ordinary Malays, Chinese, orang asli, the last seen as barely human but even then divided between Sakai and negrito ('The Flight of Chep the Bird' 175). Depending on the behaviour of white traders (unscrupulous or going native) and rajahs (despotic and venal) these could change places in the pecking order, as could Chinese and ordinary Malays. Clifford allows criticism of British scientific curiosity as imperialist intrusiveness: 'Juggins was forever talking about human knowledge, as though he and it were partners in a business firm' and has to be dissuaded from exhuming a recently buried Sakai baby and alienating all the local labour on a jungle expedition ('The Ghoul' 124). Nonetheless, Western reason is held above Eastern superstition: Clifford's 'old hand' narrator says, 'I always take books with me into the jungle, and the more completely incongruous they are to my immediate surroundings the more refreshing I find them' (126). The real boundary, however, if one pursues this contrast, is between all of these and the orang asli tribals, and that dividing line is defined in terms of civilisation versus nature.

In the title story of Clifford's *The Further Side of Silence*, Kria, a young Malay man, goes up river to establish a trade store:

Kria sat lordly in the stern, steering the little craft with a heavy wooden paddle, while two sweating and straining Sakai punted her forward against the rush of the current. He wore the loose blouse, serviceable short pants, huddled, many-coloured waistcloth, and the variegated cotton headkerchief which constitute the costume of the average up-country Malay; but judged by debased, local standards, Solomon in all his glory could hardly be held to owe a heavier debt to his tailor. The two men who worked

the boat, for example, wore nothing save a dirty strip of bark cloth twisted carelessly about their loins... Their bodies were scaly with leprous-looking skin disease, and the shaggy locks of their hair stood out around their heads in regrettable halos. They were smeared with the gray dust of wood ashes. (5)

Kria falls for a 15-year-old Sakai girl whose name ('Breeze of the Forest') and appearance amongst jungle foliage place her as a child of nature. The jungle, in fact, gives her power over Kria, since it is her freedom and his prison: 'he was subtly conscious that she was, in some strange fashion, an integral part of the forest that surrounded them; that she was a stranger to the life of mankind, as he understood it — the life of folk of his own race — who, at best, are only trespassers upon Nature's vast domain' (9). Pi-Noi is flighty ('liar'), merely mimics Malay ways as a game and, easily bored, throws off her new clothes and domestic confinement and disappears into the jungle.

Clifford uses an antiquated prose style to folklorise both Malay and Sakai, but here deploys the idea of Nature to privilege the orang asli and cast a critical eye over the Malay. In fact, it is Kria's jealousy and wanting to control his wife, and his Malay colleagues' prejudices that lead to the murder of the girl and her brother. She is seen as both worthlessly expendable and inherently immoral as well as a heathen linked to witchcraft, so there is no compunction about killing her, although Kria kills the killer and dies in the process. This is, of course, a colonial ploy to justify white rule by subtly making the romantic Western reader a pseudo child of the forest and un-naturalising the local population most likely to present opposition to the power with which reader and writer are aligned. It obscures what is obvious: that the Malay characters are also the closest to the British reader in terms of civilisational qualities, and the jungle even more hostile to the white colonist than the Malay; that the white reader is enmeshed in a romantic economy of passion even as he or she is being taught to feel superior to the Malay who is tragically subject to passion. In fact, Clifford presents the marvels of Malayan life as gothic romance from the 'Middle Ages' of superstition. He allows that all people share in the same stories of magic and the supernatural, but does so from a superior position of modern anthropological overview, admitting the colonial dilemma of having to both rely on and dismiss 'masses of native evidence' ('The Were-Tiger', 40–41).

It is the forest that is the site of adventure, of fear, of the supernatural: both Malay and European prefer village and town settled existence (46) to even a daylight trip through the jungle unless in company, although Clifford's narrator confesses that British rule has reduced Malaya to 'deplorably monotonous and insipid conditions' such that Raja Haji Hamid accompanies him to an independent state in the hope of some excitement even though the outcome will be more 'pacification' ('The Experiences of Raja Haji Hamid' 56, 61). If white reason is modernity and Malay feudal society is the middle ages, then the forest is primeval night. Nature, as the river Telom 'in the remote interior of Pahang', fights, tears,

bites and wrestles furiously with its surroundings, swelling to 'impetuous rage' and ebbing into 'a sullen wrath which is even more formidable and dangerous' ('In the Valley of the Telom' 77). It dictates the pattern of Malay life, allowing tin sluicing in the dry and threatening leeches and fever in the wet (80–81). Its provision of durian in season to Sakai results in a fight for possession between man and beast (82) and its salt generates biological urges in both animal and orang asli alike (83–84).

What is of particular interest in the text is the likening of a rampaging elephant's trumpeting to 'the sound of a steam siren' (88) — the only moment of modern industrial imagery in eighty pages. This machine of power demolishes other signs of civilisational power such as an iron cooking pot and brass sireh containers and reduces Malay and Sakai alike to abject simian tree climbers. Although Pandak Aris recovers quickly and berates his superstitious Sakai guides (figured as akin to 'other lower animals' and 'terrified apes' (88), they will not come down and he is benighted in all senses of the word, unable to locate his flint and steel to start a fire. There is here, an interesting exchange between nature and manufacture. Jungle insects sound a 'tocsin' (93) and humans are stripped of technology. Smell and hearing surpass sight at this point (95–97) and reason is suspended in a battle between man and beast that leaves little supremacy to either save for the buttress roots of a tree protecting the man. The Sakai, who ape-like take to the trees, are the survivors, and minister to the wounded man while they feast on the carcass of the marauding Selandang buffalo. Nature supplies danger and adventure, but humanity consists in successfully extracting oneself from the frontier between man and nature. The Sakai, however, complicate the equation by constantly crossing the boundary between the two while avoiding the drama entailed in the conflict of one technology versus another. Can it be, then, that white and brown are on the same side in the fight against the jungle? Have the orang asli been overlooked in this battle between technology of nature and technology of town? Can it also be that in resenting the impositions of British colonialism, the colonised Malay opted for an oppositional hyper-civilisational image resulting today in twin towers and the depletion of the natural world?

Clifford invokes the geographic determinism of colonial discourse that favours people from temperate climes who can 'bend Nature ... to their will':

Nature has been very lavish to the Malay, and has provided him with a rich soil that produces a maximum of food in return for a minimum of grudging labour; but rightly viewed, he has suffered at her hands an eternal defeat. In the tropics no less than in the arctic regions, nature has proved too strong a competitor for mankind. In the latter she has forced men to hibernate ... in the former she has rushed in to obliterate the works of human beings with so appalling a rapidity, if for a moment their efforts to withstand her have been relaxed, that here, too, they have abandoned an unequal contest. ('He of the Hairy Face' 151)

Apart from the obvious contradiction of the colonial myth of the lazy native contained in this, there is the image of nature as an implacable foe that, if

embedded in the colonised population as well as the culture of the coloniser, must result in a counter-attack once technology and economic drive make it possible.

Having spent the best part of his book referring to the jungle people as Sakai, Clifford somewhat amazingly notes:

If there be one thing that the jungle folk dislike more than another, it is to be called 'Sakai' to their faces, and they are never so addressed by a Malay unless he wishes to bully them. The word, which has long ago lost its original meaning, signifies a slave or a dog; but by the Aborigines it is regarded as the most offensive word in the Malayan vocabulary. In their own tongue they speak of themselves as *sen-oi* — which means a 'man' — as opposed to *gob*, which signifies 'foreigner'...

(*'The Lone-hand Raid'* 227)

He continues to refer to the Senoi as Sakai, thereby implicating himself in the same arrogant disregard for the orang asli as he depicts in his Malay characters. This is so even as he creates the Senoi as innocent victims and children of nature against whom his relatively sophisticated but barbarous Malays appear as cruelly unscrupulous. It is part of Empire's rhetoric of protection (Clifford patrols to protect Senoi against Malay and Malay villager against the oppression of despotic Rajas). But that paternalism hides an underlying indifference unless peasant or tribal supplies enough local colour as raw material tribute to process a story from (*'Flight of the Jungle-Folk'* 270; *'One who had eaten my Rice'* 280). If we think of Philip Holden's thesis of how emergent national elites schooled under Empire are interpellated into civilised citizens, does the Malay reader learn to identify with the narrating voice as an urbane onlooker to a jungle world, who nonetheless from that insulated, more liberal humanist position still perpetuates careless, discriminatory attitudes against 'bush' people and nature?

Clifford does indulge in some romantic awe of the forest and values 'little glimpse vouchsafed to unworthy man of the vision of the true God' (390) that he momentarily catches in its fastness. The up-country world he describes has all the freedom of 'unrestrained savageness' (398) — arbitrary fate, devious human contrivance, and rule by brute force; the order he is there to impose is the mechanical world of limiting regulated modernity, as he realises when he visits the Serempan Falls for a second time and finds the violence of the river harnessed to supply power to a nearby mine by 'the tyrannous white men' — in this case, a group of Australians (386, 402). The romance of his being amongst natural men and things comes about because he is the front runner of a system of unnatural controls the effect of which will be to push back and tame the natural world. And the modern Malaysian state is the direct inheritor of this contradictory celebration and denial of nature.

Nations claim their natural, organic identity from a spurious equation between people, national space and nature, but as nations also define themselves as civilised entities with some supposed organic identity (see Schama). Aboriginality is the point of authentication and separation; unity with nature is part of aboriginality.

So in Australia there is a celebration of the bushman: the British settler becoming Australian by learning to live close to the land, and sometimes close to the Aboriginal population. But we also find the accompanying need to differentiate the civilised white man from the stone-age creature of nature who at once authorises and challenges the right of the coloniser to become Australian. In similar vein, Clifford admires the Senoi for their ability to live in harmony with the jungle while dismissing them as merely upright animals: orang hutan, in fact, though their language is like bird cries even if their faces are simian (Clifford, 'The Further Side of Silence'). The British of course were not threatened by orang asli, so could afford to adopt a paternalistic tolerance of them, and indeed, they recognised their bushcraft and put it to use when they recruited them into their anti-terrorist campaign, just as Malaysia maintains a special group within the police force for border security and jungle rescue operations ('Senoi Praak'). From the perspective of environmental postcolonialism, we might ask to what extent Clifford's colonial discourses of indigeneity and nature have been carried over into contemporary nationalist thought, and how they continue to influence general attitudes to nature and all life forms associated with it.

Clifford writes of an era before 'such a product as plantation rubber had come into existence' when trade was based on gathering by hand rattan, 'wild gutta' gum and forest product by hand ('The Lone Hand Raid' 223). His sense of a fallen world of industrial modernity that his administration ushers in is realised in the brutalising social effects of plantation labour colonies recorded by K.S. Maniam in *The Return*. In more recent times, urban development and the profits to be made from oil palm (a colonising plant introduced from West Africa) are completing the conversion of the autochthonous jungle into globalised monoculture. The point is not new, as is clear from artwork by people like Jalaini Abu Hassan who sounds a small gong in his 2008 exhibition *Chanang* against hypocrisy and abuses of power, whether gendered, political or environmental, and again, K.S. Maniam looks at some of the effects of this in *Between Lives* (2003). Considering the nature of Malaysia's economic miracle, no wonder timber has to be taken from the Pacific: local forests have already been logged to make way for towns and plantations, now palm oil is the global successor to rubber. But external commodity imperialism rests on internal colonisation and that in turn is part of a transnational imperialism of corporate capital. Change is partly nationally driven, but one has to ask about the extent to which the moneyed elite are responding to or even caught within the demands of an imperialist global capitalism fuelled by the First World and China. Whatever the nature of the dynamic, and regardless of whether one is muslim, christian, hindu, buddhist, Western or Eastern, it rests on the ways in which societies think, behave and legislate in relation to nature.

This has always been part of colonialist discourse, but it has also become the leading edge of postcolonial research. Focus has shifted from questions of national identity and the expression and recognition of minority cultures to nature writing and ecocriticism. Arundhati Roy moved from *The God of Small*

Things, with its small-town claustrophobic dysfunctions mixed with diasporic movements across country and oceans, satellite TV, and IMF grants to rice farmers, to writing polemical essays on state corruption, multinational capitalism and the attack on environment and rural minorities represented by large-scale dam building on the Narmada river system. Postcolonial discourse analysts have followed suit, examining the new imperialism of economic rationalism, its displacement of humanist and civil society discourses, and the cultural patterns of representation (in the West from Enlightenment utilitarian Reason on the one hand and the Bible on the other) that make the degradation of the natural world seem a justifiable, sensible process. One part of this shift has been to extend the frontiers of difference from national, racial, and gender difference, to inspect the 'species boundary' between humans and nature. Helen Tiffin, one of the pioneers of postcolonial theory's reshaping of Commonwealth Literature studies, has been one of the leaders of this change and some of the results can be seen in her editing with Graham Huggan of an edition of *Interventions* (2009).

Tiffin has spent time in Borneo, and postcolonial artists in the region are beginning to depict some of the world's concerns about what is happening. At the popular end of the literary scale (where social issues often get an early airing, even if they are pretexts for formula adventure stories), Shamini Flint, former Malaysian lawyer and now Singaporean writer, has a down-at-heel Sikh policeman from Singapore investigate the murder of a society figure in Kuala Lumpur supposedly by his Singaporean wife. Her playboy husband Alan Lee has headed a logging company that his resentful businessman brother Kian Min wants to control and he is also resented by his other brother, Jasper, who is a nature-lover. Kian Min has been courting Chinese money to turn from logging to bio-fuel:

China's need for wood products was inexhaustible. Ever since the severe flooding around the Yangtze River a few years back, the Chinese government had cracked down hard on excessive or illegal logging on the mainland. But this had not in any way dampened the demand for wood in the massive ongoing construction site that was China. And the authorities, so belatedly mindful of the degradation of their own environment, turned a blind eye to wood sourced from overseas. As a result, primary forests from across Asia, from Papua New Guinea to Borneo, were being denuded at a rate that would soon see the end of the great jungles of Asia. (94)

Kian Min has commanded gangs in Borneo to clear out Penan villages and open up protected forest tracts for palm oil (85, 113, 128, 265). Inspector Singh teams with Inspector Mohammad to expose the high-level corruption, which ends in Kian Min being killed by a British anthropologist in revenge for the death of his Penan wife and unborn child. It seems possible to make equivalences of postcolonial neo-imperialist dynamics between the tribal groups in the Pacific being dispossessed of land and traditional livelihoods by people from overseas and the Senoi or Penan losing territory to people from within their own nation space, both processes being moved along by local politics and global economics.

What is interesting in this detective yarn is that, in contrast to the Greenpeace photo-shoot, indigenous people are not presented as merely a colourful part of the natural scene to be preserved in the services of romantic idealism, but as part of a politicised human network of contending interests. Flint suggests that the unprincipled rapacity of the loggers is owing to a deep-seated suspicion on their part that they are wrong (240) — something that finds an echo in the settler histories of ex-colonies like Australia. Also the jungle is not only set at a nostalgic distance from the world of the main characters; it is a dirty and dangerous place and yet has a strong appeal (42–43), and is linked to the life of the nation: an irate Malay policeman drags Kian Min into the smog-laden summer streets of the modern city to show him the effect of the burning off of felled vegetation across Borneo and Indonesia (164–65). This popular whodunit, then, is able to bring together ecocritical and postcolonial perspectives to produce what Rob Nixon argues for: a rethinking of the (tropical) pastoral that refuses transcendentalism in recognition of transnational cultural and political interests (236, 239). Let me quote Prof. Salleh: '[n]ature, says a Malay proverb, spreads before us as a teacher, to offer instruction — *alam berkembang menjadi guru*. Or as is suggested by a Riau proverb: We must go into the jungles to learn about human life' (Salleh 4). That may well provide inspiration for a local sense of identity and a literary tradition, but it has not stopped modern Malaysians from taking directorships in ex-colonial corporations that go into the jungles in order to cut them down.

Postcolonial analysis of national and global systems might well consider the megacorporation of Sime Darby. What was a plantation founded by two Scots traders who went into rubber and later oil palm, amalgamated with another plantation set up by a British tea and cocoa trading company that expanded into rubber and then with other companies until it became a conglomerate with interests in engineering, Dunlopillo, Caterpillar machinery, BMW and Ford dealerships, hospitals and insurance. It is primarily a nationally owned corporation thanks to PM Mahathir, but gets about 60% of investment from overseas and owns huge tracts of land in Indonesia as well (Wikipedia). Indonesia and Malaysia account for around 85% of world production in palm oil (WWF). In the first half of 2010 it made 1.11 billion ringgit profit (APF). Although it now has a no-burn policy in deference to international concerns over global warming, its engineering wing is building a huge dam at Bakun in Borneo to irrigate its plantations that will displace something like 10,000 indigenous people and further reduce habitat for plants and animals. Such a phenomenon presents huge challenges to the postcolonial scholar and writer. Amitav Ghosh dramatises some of these in his novel *The Hungry Tide* in which international NGOs wrestle with state governments who battle with refugee populations and tribal groups over rights to land, animal protection, and ensuring basic amenities for as many people as possible. Most people have to consider too that palm oil is in 50% of the food products sold, so they are all part of the problem. The point here is not just to cast stones at targets that by and large

are impervious to anything the Humanities can throw, but to look for dialogue and values of sustainability and community that offer some hope of minimising if not redressing inequities, exploitations and irreparable damage. This is where the multi-disciplinary spread of postcolonial studies becomes significant: humanities are good for critically analysing patterns that lie behind social problems; other modes of understanding are better at devising solutions; we need each other.

Many years ago in teachers' college, when Australia was making its turn towards Asia, I started to learn Malay. During my training I read *Hikayat Sang Kanchil*. There, without knowing it at the time, I found a fine example of the global movement of culture under expansionist trade regimes (Indian and Middle Eastern), and of the local appropriation of cultural symbols. Sang Kanchil is one of a host of postcolonial tricksters, subverting and mocking bigger, more powerful creatures. But he is also in our times a modern instance of the limits to postcolonial theories of textual and cultural politics: if the reality of imperialist power on a global scale achieves the total domination it is predicated on (the end of empire, as it is ironically worded by Fukuyama), no end of subversive play will provide a livelihood for small mousedeer: Sime Darby will have clear-felled his habitat. The challenge for postcolonial scholars, even those of us who know that there is still valuable work to be done within the small cultural spaces of regional literatures, is to push the boundaries of our discipline, continue to confront our own uneasy complicity with power, and link our activities to oppositional activism that operate across the complex intersections of minority, national and global spaces in dynamics that require our careful analytical attention to the plays and political effects of difference.

This paper is dedicated to the memory of Ivan Grguritch, exacting teacher and linguistic citizen of the world. Thanks too to the University of Wollongong for an internationalisation grant enabling its initial conference presentation.

WORKS CITED

- APF, 2010, 'Boss of Palm Oil Giant Sime Darby Departs' 13th May, online, <http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5hr9RFbyGjFkgKLYr97sABeqcyiAw>, accessed on Google, 14th May 2010.
- Aveling, Harry 2008, "'Belatedly, Asia's Literary Scene Comes of Age": Celebratory English Discourse and the Translation of Asian Literature', *ASIATIC*, 2.2, pp. 14–24.
- Baharum, Daud (comp.) 1963, *Hikayat Sang Kanchil*, OUP, Kuala Lumpur.
- Barry, Nora ca.194-, *Love in Malaya*, Currawong, Sydney.
- Centre for Environmental Law and Community Rights, Friends of the Earth PNG & Australian Conservation Foundation 2006, 'Logging and Human Rights in Papua New Guinea', online, http://www.foe.org.au/media_releases/2006, accessed June 2010.

- Clifford, Hugh 1927, *The Further Side of Silence*, Garden City, Doubleday, Page, New York.
- Davis, Glyn 2010, 'Learning To Be like the Best', *Australian Literary Review*, July 7th, pp. 8–9.
- Firth, Stewart Glenn Banks, John Connell et al. 2006, *Globalisation and Governance in the Pacific Islands*, ANU Press, Canberra, online, http://epress.anu.au/ssgm/global_gov/mobile_devices/, accessed June 2010.
- Flint, Shamini 2009, *Inspector Singh Investigates: A Most Peculiar Malaysian Murder*, Piatkus Books, London.
- Foucault, Michel 1980, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and other Writings*, trans. C. Gordon, Pantheon, London.
- Ghosh, Amitav 2001, 'Letter to the Administrators of Commonwealth Writers' Prize', online, <http://www.amitavghosh.com/cwprize.html#letter>, 18 March.
- 2005, *The Hungry Tide*, Harper Collins, London.
- 2008, *Sea of Poppies*, John Murray, London.
- Glaskin, G.M. 1961, *The Beach of Passionate Love*, Barrie & Rockliffe, London.
- Hassan, Jalaini Abu (Jai) 2008, *Chanang*, Valentine Willie, Kuala Lumpur.
- Head, Lesley and Jennifer Atchison 2009, 'Cultural Ecology: Emerging Human-Plant Geographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 33.2, pp. 236–45.
- Holden, Philip 2000, *Modern Subjects/Colonial Texts*, University of North Carolina, ELT Press, Greensboro.
- Huggan, Graham and Helen Tiffin 2009, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment*, Routledge, London.
- Kulagoe, Celo 1998, *Raindrops*, Mana Publications, Suva.
- Liligeto, Alfred Ghere 1984, *We, the Villagers*, University of South Pacific, Solomon Islands Centre, Honiara.
- McLeod, Bruce 1999, *The Geography of Empire in English Literature, 1580–1745*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge.
- Maka'a, Julian, Hilda Kii & Linda Crowl (eds) 1996, *Raetemaot: Creative Writing from the Solomon Islands*, Solomon Islands Writers Association, USP Centre, South Pacific Creative Arts Society, Institute of Pacific Studies, Honiara.
- Makini, Jully 2007, *Flotsam & Jetsam*, Institute of Pacific Studies, University of South Pacific, Suva.
- Maniam, K.S. 1981, *The Return*, Heinemann, Petaling Jaya.
- 2003, *Between Lives*, Maya Press, Petaling Jaya.
- Mauthe, Markus & Thomas Henningsen (comp.) 2008, *Forest Planet: The Last Green Paradises*, C.J. Bucher Verlag/Greenpeace, Munich.
- Nixon, Rob 2005, 'Environmentalism and Postcolonialism', *Postcolonial Studies and beyond*, ed. Ania Loomba et al, Duke UP, Durham, pp. 233–51.
- 'Rimbunan Hijau', online, <http://www.forestryanddevelopment.com/documents/pdf/fd-RHbackground.pdf>, accessed June 2010.

- Salleh, Muhammad Haji 2009, 'Words Over Borders: Trafficking Literatures in Southeast Asia,' *ASIATIC*, 3.2, pp. 1–24.
- Schama, Simon 1995, *Landscape and Memory*, Fontana, London.
- 'Senoi', Wikipedia, accessed June 2010.
- 'Senoi Praak', Wikipedia and http://askari_mb.tripod.com/id98.htm, accessed July 2010.
- Sharrad, Paul 2007, 'Estranging an Icon: Eucalyptus in India', *Interventions*, 9.1, pp. 31–48.
- Sipolo July 1981, *Civilized Girl*, South Pacific Creative Arts Society, Suva.
- 'Sime Darby', Wikipedia, Accessed 14 May 2010.
- Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty 1988, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', *Marxist Interpretations of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson & Lawrence Grosberg, Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 271–313.
- Tekahota, Willie 1996, 'Loggers', *Raetemaot: Creative Writing from the Solomon Islands*, ed. Julian Maka'a, Hilda Kii & Linda Crowl Solomon Islands Writers Association, USP Centre, South Pacific Creative Arts Society, Institute of Pacific Studies, Honiara, p. 64.
- Tiffin, Helen & Graham Huggan (eds) 2007, *Interventions*, 9.1.
- Yeow, Agnes 2009, 'Baha Zain, *Postponing Truth and Other Poems*' (review) *ASIATIC*, 3.2, pp. 124–27.
- Young, Robert 1990, *White Mythologies*, Routledge, London.
- World Wildlife Foundation, Australia, 2009, 'What is Palm Oil', online, <http://www.wwf.org.au/ourwork/land/land-clearing-and-palm-oil/>, accessed 14th May 2010.

SHAKILA ABDUL MANAN

Going against the Grain: Postcolonial Writings and Creative Performance in Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

In his essay, ‘Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain: Pragmatist-Idealist Dialectic and the Writer in Malaysia’, Kee Thuan Chye, Malaysia’s foremost playwright, critic and columnist, evaluates his position as an idealist-writer — one ‘who desires to write without fear or restraint, and to reassess it in relation to (his) willingness as a person to accept the consequences of (his) desire, no matter how adverse these consequences may be’ (67) — and as a pragmatist who also has to consider the ‘harsh realities’ in Malaysia as he is ‘subject to conditions peculiar to (Malaysian) society’. He confesses that this dilemma he is in has begun to raise ‘suspicions of (his) validity and self-worth’ and, as such, the pragmatist in him ‘is getting increasingly circumspect and sweaty under the collar’ (67).

Kee’s anxiety and sentiments are not unique to him — as they are shared by other postcolonial writers in Malaysia as well. These writers, namely, Lloyd Fernando, Che Husna Azhari, K.S. Maniam, Kee Thuan Chye, Shirley Lim, Amir Muhammad, Karim Raslan and Dina Zaman, question hegemonic and homogenising discourses in order to reveal the myopia of ethnic politics, the ills of corruption, feudalism, patriarchy, class snobbery, crass consumerism, hypocrisy and materialism assailing a newly independent multiracial and multicultural Malaysia. In the process, they have also explored the tensions between tradition and modernity and dismantled barriers to inter-cultural understanding such as the use of gender, ethnic and cultural stereotypes, the latter two of which have been propagated by colonial discursive practices.

As Kee rightly points out, we are constantly reminded to exercise caution and self-censorship by ‘sweeping any dirt under the *mengkuang mat*’ (68) or to tiptoe around the thorny hibiscus tree as unbridled freedom of expression can tear the very fabric of our young, fragile multi-racial country with its inherent cultural and religious differences and sensitivities. In Malaysia, freedom of expression is curtailed by draconian laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, the Official Secret Act/s and the Internal Security Act (a legacy of our colonial forefathers). These Acts, which have undergone several amendments over time, are considered restrictive because they empower the Home Minister to prohibit the printing, sale, import, distribution or possession of a publication, if and when

the Minister deems that the content of that publication can undermine the security of the country or if he considers the contents a threat to morality and public order. Indeed, as many argue, these are extremely severe laws as whatever decision is to be taken is considered final and not subject to judicial review (Zaharom & Mustafa, 15). Sad to say, the number of postcolonial writers, as mentioned above, who have the courage and conviction to challenge the establishment are few and far in between. Their writings, unfortunately, would only appeal to the 'literature-literate, and these are few compared to the masses who read pulp, or don't read at all' (Kee 68). As Kee argues, the voice of these few writers are often drowned by the 'idiot box' whose images would appeal more than the 'drab, black words on a page' in many Malaysian households (68).

Some potentially controversial issues have also been explored in the field of performing arts through the staging of children's street performances by local theatre groups such as the Zao Xin Chang Theatre Group and *Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio* (previously known as Teater Muda or Young Theatre Group), a non-formal collective of multi-ethnic artists and producers who stage contemporary performances (apart from festivals and exhibitions) which project a distinct postcolonial Malaysian identity and creativity. The children's street performances are collaborative efforts between local creative artists such as Janet Pillai, Tan Sooi Beng, Aida Reza (the former two are academics from the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the latter a renowned Malaysian dance choreographer), students from the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and the wider public, in particular primary and secondary school students. Performances produced by this collective, among others, include the *Red and Gold Shoe* (2001), *Hen or Rooster* (2005), *Ronggeng Merdeka* (2007), *Ko-Tai Penang* (2009/10), and *River Meets Light* (2011). This performing arts collective works in tandem with *Anak-Anak Kota* (AAK, or Children of the City), a young people's heritage education programme which was launched in 2000 to 'complement the conservation efforts taken up by the concerned citizens and heritage groups' of the community (Pillai 242). Essentially, the programme aims to empower young urban residents of the inner city of George Town, aged 12–18, to investigate, document, reflect and interpret their history and cultural environment through 'intergenerational and cross-cultural interaction with the residents of the community' (242). It is hoped that this will help enhance the children's 'appreciation of multicultural situations' and to forge 'links between personal and family history with community and regional history' (242). The programme employs an engaged art pedagogical model which accords the young participants agency by changing them into 'subjects, actors and artists, as opposed to (being) passive consumers or spectators' (243). Engaged arts is used as a learning tool as it enables the young participants to explore changing personal and community identities, lived cultural realities and to negotiate preconceived or dominant ideas of gender, culture, religion, age etc.

Using concepts drawn from postcolonial and feminist theories, the paper makes a modest attempt to show how postcolonial writings and creative performance

in Malaysia have explored potentially controversial or sensitive issues as they foregrounded the complexities and complications facing a young postcolonial nation such as Malaysia. To achieve this objective, I analyse Che Husna Azhari's story 'Ustazah Inayah' taken from her collection, *Melor in Perspective*, Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and two children's street performances *Hen or Rooster*¹ and *Ronggeng Merdeka*.²

I choose to analyse Che Husna Azhari's short story as she is one of Malaysia's younger generation of writers who is unafraid of revealing the intra-ethnic tensions and conflicts faced by her own Malay-Muslim community, their hypocrisy, class snobbery and materialism. In addition, she also unravels their hybridised and fragmented Malay-Muslim identity as a result of migration for public consumption. These are issues which are considered sensitive and are rarely scrutinised by Malay writers writing in the Malay or national language as they may be accused of casting unnecessary aspersions on the ethnic purity of the Malay community. 'Ustazah Inayah' is an interesting story as it grants Inayah, a young, highly educated, upper-class, Malay-Muslim woman, agency and voice to challenge subtly the dominant discourses of gender, tradition, religion and politics which try to define her and other Malay-Muslim women in modern day Malaysia. The story is exceptional as such Malay-Muslim women's voices are rarely articulated in literary texts written in the national language.

CHE HUSNA AZHARI'S *MELOR IN PERSPECTIVE*

Che Husna Azhari, an engineering Professor, is also a prolific writer of fiction, especially short stories. *Melor in Perspective*, one of her collections of short stories, documents the 'nuances and peculiarities' (ix) of people from Melor, a village-town in Kelantan (one of the states in Malaysia). In order to enable the reader to understand the factors that have shaped the cultural and political identity of the present generation of Kelantanese, the author embarks on her narrative journey by first providing a brief political and cultural history of Kelantan. The author traces the Kelantan people's genealogy to the Kabulis, the Islamic merchants of Afghanistan, as well as the Islamic clerics from India and the Middle-East who were responsible for disseminating Islamic knowledge in the Nusantara world. This is then followed by a probe into Kelantan's recent past, in particular colonial rule, the friction between the *Kaum Muda* and *Kaum Tua*, the younger and older group of Muslim intelligentsia, and the schism between UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) and PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia), two main contending political parties in Malaysia. Probing the collective memory or consciousness of the Kelantanese people is also crucial as it helps to explain the psychological make-up of Kelantan men and women in regard to their 'relationships and domestic power hierarchy' (35).

The recounting of the folktale surrounding the semi-mythical Queens, Cik Siti Wan Kembang and Puteri Saadong, shows Kelantanese men's psychological

acceptance of the assertive role of their women, especially in trade and commerce in Kelantan. This foray into Kelantan's rich political, historical and cultural past helps to unravel the 'hybridised', complicated and conflicting cultural identities of the Malays, in particular the women from Kelantan. These women characters in Che Husna's narratives such as Ustazah Inayah (Ustazah is an honorific title given to a female Islamic teacher) and Wan Asmah, re-negotiate *adat* (custom, habit or conventions that are commonly known or accepted), patriarchy and Islam as they make attempts to dismantle the traditional notion of womanhood.

In comparison with the other short stories in this collection, I find 'Ustazah Inayah' is the most interesting as it becomes the site for the contestation and dialogic interaction of a number of discourses, in particular that of *adat*, patriarchy, Islam, feudalism, tradition, modernity, urbanism, materialism and individualism (Wong *Aliran Monthly*). It also reveals the various tensions and conflicts faced by Malay women like Inayah in her attempts to deal with all the above discourses that help to define her. Inayah, struggles between the numerous roles that people like her are expected to play: she is a modern-educated urbanised Malay woman, a successful economist, a politician, a loving and devoted wife and mother, a dutiful daughter and grand-daughter of a respectable and well-to-do family. Although she performed well academically, she was not allowed to pursue an engineering degree in the university as that would diminish her chances of getting married. She is resigned to follow tradition by agreeing to marry her cousin, Nik Ahmed Kamil Wariya, even though she is highly educated. Che Husna's Inayah is no passive victim of patriarchal norms and tradition; she is a highly astute, intelligent and far-sighted woman who is critical of 'petty cultural mores'. Even so, she is not a cultural rebel, as she is not going to contest these traditions in a direct manner, being a devoted daughter and an upholder of tradition.

For instance, when she is harassed by her mother to marry, as it was culturally expected for women at that time to marry at a younger age, she decides to be betrothed instead to her cousin, Nik Ahmed Kamil Wiraya and not any other man. This is because she knows that, being family, he will not divorce her if she develops herself professionally and intellectually. She is quite right, as he turns out to be an extremely supportive husband. In this story, Che Husna also provides a critique of the snobbery and feudal mentality of upper class Kelantanese Malay society, particularly their penchant for names and titles such as 'Nik', 'Che' or 'Datuk' as these imply aristocratic genealogy and lineage. Che Husna also satirises this society by showing the ridiculous means taken by some of them to procure such names and titles. For instance, Dato Yeh, Inayah's grandfather, a commoner 'from some godforsaken village' (149), obtained his 'Datoship', the much-coveted title of 'Datuk Gurindam Setia Loka', after contributing a boat in the shape of a water goose to the Sultan during the latter's annual birthday celebrations. In this regard, Che Husna reveals the ills of corruption that are so prevalent in this society and Malaysian society as well, with particular regard to the return of favours.

In charting Inayah's meteoric rise in politics, Che Husna criticises the greed, hypocrisy, materialism and individualism of upper-class women politicians such as Datin Nik Rahimah and her ilk who appear to be predominantly interested in flaunting their latest material acquisitions, and contrasts them with the poorer women in her constituency, those who lack the resources for basic child-care facilities and opportunities to better themselves (Wong 150). In doing so, Che Husna reveals the social and economic inequalities in this feudal, class-based society, and shows the failure of the State to provide basic amenities to the poor. Consequently, her criticism is also directed at party politics, as the deprived in Molo society are those who 'stubbornly voted PIF' (Parti Islam Fundamentalist/Fundamentalist Islamic Party), the opposition-led party. Women such as Datin Nik Rahimah enter politics not for altruistic reasons but for the sake of promoting their own vested interests.

Che Husna registers Inayah's disillusionment with the women politicians and the party's extravagance and improper priorities — the party seeming much more interested in using the allocated funds for developing 'spiralling towers' and golf courses than crèches and a Women's Centre (150). Her disappointment stems mainly from the party's decision to shelve the above women's project as the money was siphoned off to finance other 'developmental projects'. This is not exactly a strange and bizarre happening as this kind of improper prioritising is a direct result of developmentalism and crass consumerism that have taken over Molo society and contemporary Malaysian politics. As Inayah remarks, 'the financing of the women's project would cost less than the bathroom fittings in a posh luxury hotel. It seemed, though, that when it came to priorities, the toilet users had more rights than the women in her constituency' (169).

Feeling partly responsible for this state of affairs, Inayah soon leaves the party and decides to wear a *kain kelubung* (headscarf worn by some Muslim women). This causes great concern to all as many believe that it is a sign that she has decided to become a member of the opposition party, the PIF, a party that is supposed to be much more Islamic than the dominant PMMK (Persatuan Melayu Merdeka Kelantan/Society of Independent Kelantanese Malays). Inayah, however, is uncertain about her future political intentions and inclinations. Her donning of the veil provides the catalyst for the PIF to court her, and soon the Chief of the *Majlis Muslimat* (Muslim Council), Wan Asmah, calls on her to persuade her to join PIF. Inayah is equally disappointed with the PIF as Wan Asmah's ready conferment of the title of 'Ustazah', an honorific title, on Inayah, is an act that is reflective of the 'accreditation disease' (176) that has afflicted Molo's society, especially the members of the PMMK. One senses Che Husna's biting criticism of the PMMK and the PIF in their obsession with titles, an obsession that is a manifestation of feudalism. Che Husna's critique is mostly observed in her portrayal of women characters such as Datin Nik Salmo, Inayah's grandmother, who goes to great lengths to conceal her children's common patrilineal ancestry. The Datin does

this by reconstructing a whole new identity for her family by linking it to the aristocratic or bangsawan class. This is, indeed, ironical as Datin Nik Salmo is married to a commoner whose forefathers were *tok bagehs* or evil spirit chasers and *tukang karuts* (concoctors of stories) of yore.

Like Che Husna Azhari's 'Ustazah Inayah', Lloyd Fernando also investigates a rather thorny and sensitive issue in his novel *Green is the Colour*. Here, he boldly questions the implementation of the one-language, one culture policy (Malay language and Malay culture) of the government soon after the tragic race riots of 1969. This assimilationist policy which was formulated to achieve national unity and national development has the potential of threatening the continued survival of individual ethnic and cultural identities. In this text, Fernando captures the views and perspectives of the ethnically, culturally and linguistically diverse peoples of Malaysia to contest and re-negotiate this official discourse of nation in order to enable them to construct alternative visions of nationhood and cultural identities. In the process, he is also able to deconstruct certain preconceived and dominant ideas of nation, ethnicity and gender as he crosses borders in order to break all kinds of barriers that impede inter-cultural understanding. *Green is the Colour* is a remarkable text as it shows how cultural identities are not static as they are in a perpetual state of flux. Importantly, the text is able to reflect the pluralism and the 'totality of Malaysian life with its multicultural ambience' (Quayum and Wicks xii) as the writer, Fernando, in capturing the diverse voices, has successfully 'risen above the psychological and cultural moorings' (xii) of his own Sri-Lankan community to speak to a multicultural audience.

LLOYD FERNANDO'S *GREEN IS THE COLOUR*

Lloyd Fernando is a Sri-Lankan born writer and a pioneer of creative writings and theatre in Malaysia. He was also an academic and later a lawyer and he made significant contributions to the development of Malaysian literature and drama in English through his creative output. Written in 1993, *Green is the Colour* journeys into the past to invoke people's memories of the race riots of 1969 that literally tore asunder the newly independent country of Malaysia. Essentially, it is a novel that reveals the pitfalls of 'ethnic politics' (Saravanamuttu 89) and divisive socio-economic policies suffered by a country with racial, linguistic, cultural and religious differences and sensitivities. Malaysia comprises a number of ethnically diverse people, the majority being Malays, Chinese and Indians. Malay is the official language of the country but Mandarin or Hokkien and Tamil are widely spoken and English is used as an effective second language. Although Islam is the official religion of the country, the Malaysian constitution grants religious freedom to its citizens, a number of whom practise Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Confucianism, Hinduism.

Before discussing the novel, it is important to provide a brief historical context of British Malaya and the factors leading up to the 1969 racial crisis. Malaya (the country was renamed Malaysia after achieving independence in 1957) was

colonised by the British from the eighteenth to the twentieth century. The 'divide-and-rule' policy administered by the British in Malaya before independence resulted in the formation of a plural society that was racially divided as the various ethnic groups were kept separate in their own socio-economic domains. The Malays who worked as rice farmers and fishermen in the relatively undeveloped rural sector remained poor as the British concentrated on the development of trade and industry in the urban sector. On the other hand, the Chinese who were migrant workers mainly employed in the tin mines, dominated the more developed and economically viable urban sectors. Unlike the Chinese, the Indians who were also migrant workers led an impoverished life working in the rubber estates and plantations. No attempts were undertaken by the British to enforce a fair and equitable policy to help reduce inter-ethnic socio-economic disparities. Neither were there attempts to create a 'common vision' or national aspiration to unite the three major groups of people at that time. This resulted in the promotion of an idea of nationalism, prior to independence, that was 'communalistic' in character as ethnicity became a significant factor in the various sections' articulation of nationalism. As a consequence, it triggered the formation of Malay nationalism, Chinese nationalism and Indian nationalism. Three major political parties, namely UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), MCA (Malayan Chinese Association) and MIC (Malayan Indian Congress) were established, each representing a major ethnic community. In 1952, these three parties united and called themselves the Alliance party. The party was headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman, UMNO's President, and it formed the ruling government when Malaysia achieved its independence in 1957. Tunku Abdu Rahman became the first Prime Minister of Malaysia.

The Alliance party instituted a form of political system known as 'consociationalism', a system that is dependent on the leadership to 'authoritatively bargain for the interests of that (particular ethnic) community' and negotiate dealings with the ruling government in order to 'secure compliance and legitimacy' for various bargains (Means 2). Essentially, the 'political bargains' that were mutually agreed upon by the three parties concerned the maintenance of certain Malay traditions, namely, the position of the Malay rulers, Islam as the official religion, the recognition of the Malay language as the official and national language by 1967, and the 'special position', rights and privileges to be accorded to the Malays in all sectors of the economy to enable them to compete with the other groups on an equal footing. In return, the Chinese and Indians successfully bargained for better citizenship provisions and to be allowed to play a dominant role in trade and industry. The 1969 racial riots signified the failure of this 'political bargain' — the Alliance party failed to capture the majority of seats in the general elections as there was growing discontent about the granting of 'special rights' to the Malays (Malaysia 1–2). Scholars such as Kahn and Loh (1992) contend that the system failed because of the arrival of the middle class

and their attempts to delegitimise the 'cultural vision' of the ruling government. This resulted in a major shift in governance as the ruling elites became more 'authoritative' by implementing draconian laws such as the Internal Security Act (1960), the Societies Act (1966), the Sedition Act (1970), The Universities and the University Colleges Act (1971), the Official Secrets Acts (1972), and the Printing Presses and Publications Act (1988) (Kahn and Loh 1) to maintain their status quo.

Such repressive laws make it difficult for contestations of official policy to take place and alternative views to be disseminated to the wider public. In this sense, Fernando goes against the grain as he provides the much needed space for marginalised and repressed voices to challenge the official one-language, one-culture homogenising policy of the ruling government, one that favours the dominant race of the country. The text stages the interaction of varied voices and discourses as they dialogue with each other to reveal cracks and fissures in the linear historical narrative of nation that has been presented as being unproblematic and reiterated in official discourses and history textbooks. It is worth noting that the text does not depict the various ethnic groups in a homogenous manner as not all Malays support the one-language, one-culture national policy and neither do all the Chinese disagree with it. For example, Panglima (who becomes a Malay after his conversion to Islam when he marries a local Malay-Muslim woman), is part and parcel of the political machinery of the country, and he endorses this policy but other Malays such as Dahlan, Lebai Hanafiah and Sara have reservations about it. Omar, Sara's husband, wants to go back to his roots and seeks spiritual redemption and salvation in the village amongst other religious Muslims as he finds modern life 'corrupt' and 'godless' as '[e]verywhere people were chasing money, living immoral lives (38).

To Omar, the root cause of the racial riots is religion and this is clearly shown when he says to Sara, '[i]f we were all of the same faith, it would be a different matter' (45). Suspicions are rife in this multicultural country and this is shown through Omar's tense relationship with Yun Ming. Omar does not trust the Chinese as he believes that '[t]hey wanted something in return. Honours, opportunities, contracts...' (94). He finds them hypocritical as he considers them to be quite selfish because they are not willing to share their wealth with anyone. Sara challenges his ethnic chauvinism when she says that '[m]any ordinary people (non Malays) show respect and understanding' (92) towards Malays and therefore Malays should not regard them with suspicion. Omar also adopts a 'holier-than-thou' attitude and is critical of other Malay-Muslims who are much more liberal, Westernised and secular. It is through characters such as Omar that Fernando manages to capture and reveal intra-ethnic tensions and divisions as well. This disunity is reflective of the ever widening gulf between UMNO, the dominant Malay party, and the opposition Islamic party, PAS (Parti Islam Se-Malaysia) which has, over time, fragmented the Malay community. PAS was formed to

mobilise Muslims to adhere to the fundamental ideals of the religion and to check the secular ideological leanings of UMNO (Shakila 2008 155).

Yun Ming, a Malaysian Chinese who works for the government strongly believes that a one-language, one-culture policy system can function as an effective integrative tool. Yun Ming is willing to assimilate and to sacrifice his Chinese-ness in order to prove his loyalty and patriotic feelings for the country. As Panglima tells his superior,

‘...the Chinese and the Indians had to forget where they came from. They must follow one way of life, have one way of doing things. He caught himself in time before being swept into saying they should have one religion... Everything was for the country and for the nation’. (21)

Selfless and self-sacrificing, he delivered goods by van to Malay areas at the height of the racial riots, a time when everyone was more concerned about their own safety. He speaks fluent Malay and chooses to stay on in Malaysia even though it means a separation from his English wife, Phyllis, and his son. Myths and stereotypes that have been propagated about the Chinese since colonial times, especially with regard to their money-mindedness and selfish attitude, are dispelled by Fernando through Yun Ming’s actions. However, Yun Ming’s sincerity is questioned as his ethnic origin dogs him. As intimated earlier, people like Omar will forever doubt his motives. This said, not all Chinese are seen to feel the same way as Yun Ming’s rich *towkay* father, a migrant from China who detaches himself from the politics of the country, and is more concerned about making money and becoming rich and prosperous. His brother, Chris, chooses an easy way out by migrating to Australia with his family. In this text, Fernando manages to provide opportunities for the various characters to redefine and renegotiate their identities in order to show that each ethnic community is not monolithic or homogenous.

In a multicultural country such as Malaysia, it is indeed important to educate the young about its multiethnic traditions and to inculcate in them the need to question cultural stereotypes and to cross ethnic borders that hinder inter-cultural understanding. In this sense, the discussion of the creative arts scene in Penang, in particular the children’s street performances of *Hen and Rooster* and *Ronggeng Merdeka* (see below) dovetails nicely with the discussion of Che Husna Azhari’s ‘Ustazah Inayah’ and Fernando’s *Green is the Colour*. Thematically, these texts are similar as they question worn-out cultural stereotypes and dominant ideas of nation, gender and ethnicity which together obstruct cross-cultural understanding and interaction. As intimated earlier on, the Young Theatre Group, a collective of multiethnic and arts practitioners in Penang, has initiated a multi-arts project to enable children of different class and ethnic backgrounds to ‘experiment with traditional and contemporary arts media to create a relevant and accessible form of theatre that can express children’s experiences’ (Tan 2010 230). Combining music, dance, drama, puppetry and the visual arts, this theatre group truly embraces the

performance concept of ‘total theatre’. Stories, music, games, dance, imagery and props are drawn from diverse traditional sources and collective improvisation used by the children on stage rather than the written source. Before staging the performances (dance-dramas), the young participants undergo about six months of training in ‘improvisation, role-play, mime, movement, visual arts as well as selected traditional music, dance and theatre’ (230). The young participants are also expected to go on field trips to the inner city of George Town in order to ‘observe movements and sounds of specific people, animals and the environment at specific locations’ which are then put together to form a story taken or adapted from traditional or folk sources (230–31). Multiculturalism is experienced through cross-cultural mergings in terms of dance movements, the use of musical instruments and costumes drawn from Asian and Western traditions.

CHILDREN’S CREATIVE PERFORMANCE

The tradition of street performances widely enjoyed by various multi-ethnic communities some decades ago was recreated recently through the staging of two children’s musical dramas, namely, *Hen or Rooster* and *Ronggeng Merdeka*, at various open air community spaces in Penang. The staging of *Hen or Rooster* was a collaborative effort between two theatre groups: the Zao Xin Chang Theatre Group (ZXC) and Young Theatre Penang Group. It was staged in 2005 and was directed by a creative crew comprising leading children’s theatre practitioner Janet Pillai, ethnomusicologist-cum-composer Tan Sooi Beng, visual artist Liew Kung Yu and choreographer Eng Hee Ling.

Performed in the style of a semi-musical drama, this children’s play captivated the hearts, minds and imagination of children and adults alike. The play is visually stunning as all the ‘chicken’ characters wore brightly coloured floor rugs which were made from local patchwork material and their pants consisted of colourful dhotis (a rectangular piece of loose cloth draped around the waist and upper legs of men in the Indian subcontinent); and it courageously explores issues pertaining to gender, sexuality and cultural identity — issues that are normally treated in a gingerly manner in Muslim-majority Malaysia. *Hen or Rooster* is an adaptation of the Asian folk tale ‘Roosters and Hens’ by Alejandro R. Roces. Gender was not actually an issue explored in the original story line by Roces but it was incorporated into the performance as the theatre group thought that it was important to question stereotyped behaviour by reversing male and female roles. They felt that the dismantling of gender stereotypes was timely as they were tirelessly reinforced in the media and in school textbooks. Some parents in the audience were not too pleased at this experimentation as they felt that the blurring of gender boundaries may leave the young children more confused than ever. Others felt that it was ‘educational’ as the performance conveyed the idea that everyone had an important role to play in society, regardless of gender. In this play, gender roles are toyed with mainly to show how they help create ambiguous and alternative identities. Characters swap roles as it is the mother who rides a

motorbike and the father who loves to cook. The play also dismantles people's understanding of masculinity and femininity through the use of costumes. The biker-mother is clad in black leather jacket, tight leggings and boots, evoking the image of a 'masculinised' female. The father, on the other hand, is 'feminised' as he dons an apron. Gender is also questioned through the capture of a 'transgendered chicken' by two children, a boy and a girl. In determining whether the chicken is a hen or rooster, they enter the chicken in a cock fight.

The cockfight scene between the transgendered chicken and a macho-looking rooster becomes the site for the blurring of gender identities. Through this blurring, the play challenges the idea that gender distinction is 'natural' and that masculinity and femininity are acquired from birth. Whilst fighting, the chicken shakes its bottom and hyperbolises and parodies feminine traits by performing a seductive bollywood dance to the beat of the soft and delicate *joget gamelan* music, provoking much laughter from the young audience. Spellbound, the rooster reciprocates by performing a love dance, the *joget gamelan* dance. Sensing its vulnerable state, the chicken attacks the rooster mercilessly and kills it. The play also embodies an interesting fusion of local traditions, language and cultural practices. Performers happily code-switched and code-mixed in Malay, English, Mandarin and Hokkien, a linguistic behaviour which is so typical of multicultural Malaysia

Different languages were spoken in order to make the play accessible to the young audience. Lines were not memorised as the performers worked on a loose script, and so they transcended linguistic and cultural borders. Most of the time, they had to translate lines and jokes from one language to another on the spot. The play thereby demonstrates the linguistic versatility of the various ethnic communities in Malaysia. More importantly, it shows that they are not linguistically homogenous and that their cultural identity is not fixed, unitary or unchanging. Performers, regardless of their ethnic origin could speak in a variety of local languages. In Malaysia, there are Malays who can speak Hokkien, the local Chinese dialect, and there are Chinese who may not be able to converse in Hokkien but only in Malay or English. Likewise, there are Chinese who may speak Tamil but Indians who can only communicate in Malay.

Ronggeng Merdeka was staged at five open air community spaces in Penang and on the mainland in 2007. It was organised by *Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio* in co-operation with the School of Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia and Penang Heritage Trust. The play journeys into Penang's rich historical past and reveals the trials and tribulations of its people from the 1930s through the Japanese Occupation up to the period of Malaysia's independence. The community spaces became the site for all kinds of border crossings and cross-cultural exchange: it had a multi-ethnic cast from all age groups. Songs that were sung included Malay, Hokkien and English words and the musical ensemble comprised the *Malay gamelan* and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppet) instruments together with the Chinese *erhu* and

shigu and the Western violin and flute. Dances integrated the cha-cha, rumba, Malay dance numbers such as the *inang* and *zapin* and the Indian *Bharatnatyam*.

The play provided agency and voice to the *Ronggeng* girls to counter views that had maligned them, many of whom were Malay-Muslims. *Ronggeng* is a social dance performed by young lower class women who invited men to dance with them on stage in entertainment parks and club houses in exchange for tips. It was a popular dance form and activity before independence and in the '60s and '70s. Currently, it has been recreated and transformed into a national dance form and has attracted performers from all ethnic groups (Tan 2005 287). The *Ronggeng* girls then had been castigated by the religious authorities before and soon after independence for parading on stage in their figure hugging *kebayas* (a traditional blouse-dress costume worn by Malay women in Malaysia) and inviting men to dance with them. The girls were paid money for each dance that they had with the men. Worried about deteriorating morals amongst the girls, Malay newspapers criticised their lifestyle and livelihood. Undeterred, the *Ronggeng* girls carried on to eke out a living. They were accomplished singers and dancers and the job provided them with a steady source of income. In the day time, they attended to household chores and became *Ronggeng* girls at night. This is clearly revealed in the second verse of their theme song:

Kami Penghuni Malaya
Melayu, India dan Cina,
Waktu siang kerja rumah
Waktu malam keluar berniaga
Menghibur semua di taman
Beronggeng-ronggeng ka *tua se kai*

(We residents of Malaya
Malays, Indians and Chinese
Morning we attend to our chores
At night we do business
Entertaining all in the park
Perform the *ronggeng* dance in the *tua se ka kai*)

It is interesting to note is that these *Ronggeng* girls are like other women, then and now. They had several identities: they were not just someone's wife, mother or daughter but were also working women who contributed significantly to the family's household income and the state. Like other women, they were also used, controlled, oppressed and subjugated by patriarchy and men as conveyed in the lyrics of their songs which they parodied on stage:

Lelaki balik rumah, ceduk nasi, macam tak ada tangan
Kasut pun kena pakai untuk dia
Even the cloth we have to choose for them
Lengkuk badan, abang
Tiap-tiap hari tunggu kat rumah
This trousers will do, abang

Abang nak kasut inikah?

Dia pun kerja, kita pun kerja.

(Men return home, we have to ladle the rice for them, as though they have no hands of their own,

We have to put on the shoes for them,

Even the cloth we have to choose for them

Sway your body, *abang* [an endearing and respectful term to refer to their husbands]

Every day we wait for them at home

This trousers will do, *abang*

Abang, would you like this pair of shoes?

He goes to work, so do we)

In the musical drama, the *Ronggeng* was performed by 16–18 year old girls who had also used the occasion to relate to the audience their pain and suffering during the Japanese Occupation and their struggle towards independence. The war had changed their lives as they had to bury their *kebayas* and smear their faces with charcoal to look unattractive to the Japanese soldiers. Whilst the men fought in the war, the *Ronggeng* girls had to look after their homes and family. The audience, especially the senior citizens, who had experienced first-hand the Japanese occupation, were visibly moved, as they swayed their bodies to the music and songs of the 1940s and 1950s. Seated on four-legged stools in the open-air community space, the senior citizens nodded in agreement to statements made, clapped and raised their hands. The scenes could have rekindled their memories of bygone days and their experiences at the *tua se kai* or entertainment outlets such as the Penang Wembley theatre and the Great World park of yesteryears. Some were choked with emotions when they witnessed the re-enactment of the *Sook Ching* scene, the massacre of the Chinese by the Japanese during the Japanese Occupation.

CONCLUSION

Driven by the commitment to truth and justice, many writers, creative people and artists such as the ones that have been discussed above, are inclined to look for fissures and contradictions in society where in their own peculiar ways they can test the waters as well as push the envelope. By doing so, they inevitably challenge not only conventional wisdom but also the establishment, particularly the kind that is arrogantly authoritarian. Additionally, it is in the very realm of culture that these writers, creative people and artists seek and find space to offer critical messages, alternative ideas and raise consciousness among the general populace. In other words, the short stories, novels, staged plays, songs and music become a convenient ideological vehicle for these creative people to share their sentiments and views which may go against the grain with the rest of society. As such, I would like to be a tad more optimistic than Kee as these ‘idealist’ creative artists have tried and are trying in their own little way to push boundaries and to show a ‘firm commitment to truth’ by opposing ‘anything that seeks to oppress, injure, or destroy humanity’ (Kee 67).

NOTES

- ¹ For a detailed discussion of this play, refer to Shakila Abdul Manan 'Why did the Chicken Cross the Border', *Aliran Monthly*, 8, 2005. *Hen or Rooster* is an adaptation of the Asian folk tale 'Roosters and Hens' by Alejandro R. Roces.
- ² For a detailed discussion of this play, refer to Shakila Abdul Manan 'Ronggeng Merdeka' *Aliran Monthly*, 6, 2007.

WORKS CITED

- Che Husna Azhari 1993, *Melor in Perspective*, Furada Publishing House, Bandar Baru Bangi.
- Fernando, Lloyd 1993, *Green is the Colour*, Landmark, Singapore.
- Francis Loh Kok Wah (ed.) 2010, *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Everyday Forms of Inter-Ethnic Peace Building in Malaysia*, Vinlin Press, Malaysia.
- Kahn, Joel S. and Francis Loh Kok Wah 1992, *Fragmented Vision-Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- Kee Thuan Chye 2001, 'Dilemma of a Dog Barking at a Mountain: Pragmatist-Idealist Dialectic and the Writer in Malaysia', *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, Longman, Selangor, pp. 67–72.
- Malaysia 1971, *Towards a National Harmony*, National Printing Department, Kuala Lumpur.
- Maznah Mohamad & Wong Soak Koon (eds). 2001, *Risking Malaysia — Culture, Politics and Identity*, U of Kebangsaan Malaysia P, Bangi.
- Means, Gordon P. 1991, *Malaysian Politics: The Second Generation*, OUP, Singapore.
- Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks (eds). 2001, *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, Longman, Selangor.
- Mohammad A. Quayum 2001, 'Shaping a New National Destiny with Dialogic Vision: Fernando's *Green is the Colour*', *Malaysian Literature in English: A Critical Reader*, ed. Mohammad A. Quayum and Peter C. Wicks, Longman, Selangor, pp. 168–73.
- Pillai, Janet 2010, 'Teater Muda: Social and Cultural Engagement through the Arts', *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Everyday Forms of Inter-Ethnic Peace Building in Malaysia*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah, Vinlin Press, Malaysia, pp 237–54.
- Saravanamuttu, Johan 2004, 'Malaysian Multicultural Policy and Practices: Between Communalism and Consociationalism', *The Challenge of Ethnicity: Building a Nation in Malaysia*, ed. Cheah Boon Kheng, Marshall Cavendish, Singapore, pp 89–114.
- Shakila Abdul Manan 2008, 'Unpacking Nationalism: Reading Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour*', *Exploring Space: Current Trends in Linguistics, Literature and Translation*, ed. Shakila Abdul Manan and Lalita Sinha, Cambridge Scholars Publishin, Newcastle, pp. 141–64.

- Shakila Abdul Manan 2005, 'Why did the Chicken Cross the Border?', *Aliran Monthly*, 25.8, online, <http://aliran.com/archives/monthly/2005b/8k.html>
- Shakila Abdul Manan 2007, 'Ronggeng Merdeka', *Aliran Monthly*, 27.6, online, <http://aliran.com/360.html>.
- Tan Sooi Beng 2010, 'Crossing Stylistic Boundaries and Transcending Ethnicity through the Performing Arts', *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Everyday Forms of Inter-Ethnic Peace Building in Malaysia*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah, Vinlin Press, Malaysia, pp. 223–36.
- Tan Sooi Beng 2005, 'From Folk to National Popular Music: Recreating *Ronggeng* in Malaysia', *Journal of Musicological Research*, 24.3–4, Routledge, London, pp. 287–307
- Wong Soak Koon 2001, 'Revisiting Malay Feminism, *Risking Malaysia — Culture, Politics and Identity*, ed. Maznah Mohamad & Wong Soak Koon, U of Kebangsaan Malaysia P, Bangi, pp. 139–55.
- Wong Soak Koon 2002, 'Rethinking the Nation', *Aliran Monthly* 22.3, online <http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/monthly/>.
- Zaharom Nain and Mustafa K. Anuar 1998, 'Ownership and Control of the Malaysian Media', *Media Development*, 4/1998.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM

Introducing Huzir Sulaiman: A Malaysian Playwright

This interview was conducted via electronic mail in July 2007¹ when I decided to include Huzir Sulaiman's play, *Atomic Jaya*, in my undergraduate course on Malaysian and Singaporean Literature. Since little was available on this young playwright, I thought an interview would help to elicit some information that would shed light on his imagination, creative process, and the published works; and it might also trigger more discussion on the playwright, especially in the academic and critical circles.

One of Malaysia's pre-eminent playwrights, Huzir Sulaiman, was born in Kuala Lumpur, in 1973. In 1996 he founded Straits Theatre Company in Kuala Lumpur.



In 2002 he co-founded Checkpoint Theatre in Singapore and continues to act as one of its Joint Artistic Directors. In 2004, he became the inaugural recipient of the Writing Fellowship jointly awarded by the National University of Singapore and the Arts House, and in 2007 he was awarded a Yale World Fellowship. He teaches playwriting at the National University of Singapore. Several of his plays are collected in his book *Eight Plays* (Silverfishbooks, Kuala Lumpur, 2002). They include *Atomic Jaya* (first staged 1998), *The Smell of Language* (1998), *Hip-Hopera* (1998), *Notes on Life & Love & Painting* (1999), *Election Day* (1999), *Those Four Sisters Fernandez* (2000), *Occupation* (commissioned by the 2002 Singapore Arts Festival), and *Whatever That Is* (2002). His unpublished plays include *Lazy Hazy Crazy* (1997), *They Will Be Grateful* (2003), *One Plot* (written 2002, as yet unstaged), *Colony of Singapore* (written 2005, as yet unstaged), and *Cogito* (a commission of the 2007 Singapore Arts Festival).

Huzir Sulaiman is best known for his play *Atomic Jaya* in which he takes a swipe at 'Brand Malaysia,' or the technologically and materially aspiring country which has boarded the juggernaut of modernity but has become aimless and seriously dysfunctional owing to its deep-rooted moral decadence and the lack of a clear sense of itself as a nation. The play probes the country's ailing social and

political systems; its festering consumerism, inane collectivism, and moribund traditions; as well as its failure to institute policies that would make the society fair, equitable, morally just, and intellectually dynamic. However, Sulaiman's sarcasm and cynicism are tempered with a healthy dose of humour so that readers feel a sense of relief as they witness the volley of his attack on his own people; he is angered and yet amused by their banality, mental vacuity, apathy, and pomposity. Although the play is mainly about Malaysia and its manifold weaknesses, one end of the playwright's forked dagger, wrapped in scintillating witticism and irony, is also aimed at Western capitalism and American 'Big Brotherism'.

The play deals with an imaginary situation in which Malaysia is involved in making a nuclear bomb, and the country begins to celebrate its success in the project although it is eventually doomed to failure because of the all round incompetence, intellectual numbness, and nonchalance of those involved in the enterprise. The project is overseen by a dumb Minister who cannot differentiate between 'uranium' and 'Iranian' and thinks that having the bomb would help boost the country's tourism industry: '[w]e are develop the atomic bomb as a tourist attraction. Don't worry, you no-need to understand. I also don't understand. But never mind. To boost the tourism sector, we are develop the atomic bomb' (24), the Minister declares in a weary voice in his home-grown English or *Manglish* (mangled English). This is the Minister's response at a press conference to a CNN report that accuses Malaysia of having an atomic weapons programme. The Minister further declares that the country has made a rousing patriotic song to celebrate its triumph or *jaya* (and hence the name of the play) in making the nuclear bomb, although no tangible progress has been achieved in the campaign, and the song is played over the TV and Radio to counter the foreign media as well as to instil pride in its people — an attempt for the country to shine without any real light or lustre, and thwart foreign propaganda with silly but purposeful misinformation of its own. The song, which is sung in a chorus (reminiscent of the trite unity of Eliot's hollow men), and with total blackout on stage (suggestive of the inherent lie in it), is quoted below to provide a glimpse of the way Huzir Sulaiman brilliantly exposes and attenuates the arrogance and vanity which, he thinks, drives the modern, mindless, materialistic, Malaysian nation, in his play:

Colonialism is now gone
 Now our government is strong
 We are proud to be Malaysian
 We are nice to our neighbour nations
 We trim the hedge, mend the fence
 Spend some money on defence
 So when they come from near and far
 Our atomic bomb will be a star

Chorus:

We've got the atomic bomb!
 We've got the atomic bomb!

The Malaysian atomic bomb!
 The pride of our nation!
 We've got the atomic bomb!
 Our very own atomic bomb!
 The Malaysian atomic bomb!
 To keep our nation proud and strong!

Malaysia is now the best
 Commonwealth Games and Everest
 The MSC, the Twin Towers
 We are now a superpower
 We learn and love and use IT
 To earn the world community's
 Respect, and they will see we're strong
 Now we have the atomic bomb

(Repeat chorus). (25)

The Malaysian brand of multiculturalism is also under scrutiny in the play. Malaysia is made up of diverse races, and there is a recurrent tension between the Malays who claim ancestry to the land and call themselves 'bumiputras' (children of the soil), and those who have travelled to this region from elsewhere (mainly India and China) and established a new home and hearth during the British colonial period. Maintaining balance and harmonious relationship between these diverse groups of people, with different history, languages, and religious practices, poses an ongoing challenge for the Government. To manage this diversity better, the Government has divided the population into four categories — Malay, Chinese, Indian, and Others — at the cost of erasing the different nuances of identity within these broad categories. Therefore, one is seen as an Indian, and not a Bengali or Punjabi; a Chinese, and not a Cantonese or Hakka. In spite of this attempt to simplify the identity of its citizens and the show of unity by trying to accommodate members of these different cultural groups in any undertaking by the Government, mutual suspicion and simmering tension between the groups, especially between the Malays and the non-Malays, continue to plague the nation.

Thus, the play shows three scientists from three different cultural backgrounds working on the nuclear project — Mary Yuen (Chinese), Saiful (Malay) and Ramachandran (Indian). This is mainly because, as General Zulkifli, the army officer who came up with the idea of creating the bomb to enhance national pride and who has been put in charge of the project, explains, somewhat casually and yet in a deadpan voice, that Ramachandran has been included in the project: 'so that we can have one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian. Otherwise not complete. Chinese do the work, Malay take the credit, Indian get the blame' (16). It is the last part of his statement which betrays the insincerity of the authorities who are willing to create the unity but without according equal right, respect, and dignity to all its citizens. Mary Yuen is the only trained scientist in the project with a degree in Nuclear Science from the University of Chicago, and yet somehow

Saiful, who fails to distinguish between ‘fission’ and ‘fishing,’ and who ‘used his own skull to measure the penetrative power of alpha-beta-gamma-X-rays’ (15), is appointed the chief physicist, only by virtue of his identity as a Malay. Huzir Sulaiman is challenging this hierarchic norm which he sees as a deterrent to creating a horizontal and harmonious nation in a multicultural society.

However, as mentioned earlier, a part of the playwright’s *feu d’enfer* is also directed at America and its Big Brotherism, as he introduces Madeline Albright, the former Secretary of State, as a character in the play, who says the following at a press conference at Washington D.C. after her ‘tense and unproductive’ meeting with the Malaysian Ambassador to the US, on the subject of Malaysia seeking to enter the nuclear club:

Albright: There will be serious consequences if Malaysia detonates an atomic device. The United States stands by its policy to punish those nations who arbitrarily assume nuclear powers, who contribute to the growing global nuclear arms menace. We have the might, and we have the right, and we will not hesitate to fight for the right to our might, and our might alone. We want to remind the people of Malaysia of the words of a great American president, who said, ‘Ask not what your country can do for you; rather ask what our country can do to your country’. (35)

This statement of mockery and farce exposes the basic hypocrisy of the United States which claims itself to be the most advanced and civilised country in the world but practises the law of the jungle, of might is right, to establish its global dominance. It also shows how America, which was founded on the glorious principles of democracy and equality of all human beings, has become essentially perverted in its foreign policy, owing to its relentless desire to rule the rest of the world. The statement also gives a concrete relevance to the play in international politics, although it is based on an imaginary situation, as we see a similar treatment of Iran by the US with regard to the former’s nuclear ambition, played out daily on CNN, BBC, and other international media.

This tendency to establish justice within the borders of his own nation, as well as in the international arena, conveyed in sound dramatic techniques, in which seriousness is deftly coated in wit and humour, and digs and gibes lurk behind every laughter — the scope of his thought, the canvas of his art, his skilful fusion of artistry and imagination — is what makes Huzir Sulaiman a major Malaysian playwright, and fully deserving of international attention.

* * * * *

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYUM: *Tell us a bit about your family, childhood, and education. When were you first introduced to the English language and to English literature?*

HUZIR SULAIMAN: I’m the only child of lawyers and academics. My father’s from Penang, and my mother’s from Singapore. We’ve always spoken

English at home; as far as I can work out, my family on both sides has been educated in English for three or four generations (despite also containing speakers of Malay, Tamil, Malayalam, Hindi, Urdu, and whatever language my Tartar great-great-grandfather spoke). I remember we listened to the BBC World Service quite a bit during dinner, through a shortwave radio that was sometimes overcome by waves of static. There was always a coup d'état or something exciting happening. To this day the World Service theme, 'Lilliburlero', makes my heart beat faster. It's the secret vice of many postcolonial writers, apparently.

I started school in London when my parents were doing their Masters. One day when I was about 5, I came home from school to find the television missing. My parents said they were taking it away because I wasn't reading enough. After that, we didn't have a TV in the house until I was about 21 when I bought one with my own money. But I'd never gotten into the habit of watching it, so I suppose I did read quite a bit. My father's taste was more historical and current affairs, as well as detective novels, while my mother read more serious literary fiction.

As a child I suffered from bad asthma, and would miss school every so often. My inclination was to lie around and not do much of anything, but my father would insist that I research something from the Encyclopaedia Britannica and the other books in the house and present a paper to him when he came back from work. My taste for self-directed study probably comes from there. An American professor friend of my parents wrote something to me when I was very young: 'You must wean yourself off teachers'. It made a big impression on me, probably because I have an instinctive dislike of authority.

In my teens I used to play role-playing games with my friends, things like Dungeons and Dragons, and I usually wound up being the Dungeon Master, creating the worlds and taking my friends on these adventures. It's been twenty years since I thought about it but I now realise it was probably very good training for a playwright and actor.

MAQ: *Recollect for us some of the books you read in childhood. Have they in any way contributed to the making of who you are?*

HS: I tend to think I'm quite transparently the sum of the books that I read in my childhood. Tolkien, like everybody else; Douglas Adams' *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, and perhaps more importantly the radio series, which my friend Brian lent me tapes of; the great comic novels of P.G. Wodehouse, Evelyn Waugh, and Nancy Mitford; Gerald Durrell, particularly his Corfu trilogy of memoirs. The cartoon albums of Lat were hugely influential. I think *Kampung Boy* and *Town Boy* are the standard by which every Malaysian work of art should be judged: masterworks of beautiful, economical storytelling. They're seemingly simple, but actually

very deep. I've always tried to write scenes as funny, nuanced and true as the one in *Town Boy* where he and his Chinese friend discuss dietary restrictions.

Mat: 'Is there anything that you can't eat?'

Frankie: 'Mutton!'

Mat: 'Why? Because of religion?'

Frankie: 'No ... because I cannot *tahan* the smell',

Twenty-five years later that scene sticks in my head.

I was in hospital with appendicitis when I was 13, and one of my parents' friends, Dr. Arichandran, came to visit and gave me a copy of *Brighter than a Thousand Suns*, a history of the Manhattan Project. It became one of my favourite books and led to a great interest in science, or more specifically the history and culture of science, which twelve years later resulted in my first full length play, *Atomic Jaya*, a satire about the making of the Malaysian atomic bomb. So I've always believed that giving someone the right book at the right time can have a profound impact on their life.

MAQ: *Were you a theatregoer from childhood? I know you acted your first role when you were 7 years old. In hindsight, was that a turning point in your life?*

HS: I was in the *Little Clay Cart*, at the Experimental Theatre, University Malaya. I think my line was 'My father! My father!' Following that earth-shattering debut I was in Rendra's *The Struggle of the Naga Tribe*, playing a village kid. Then I was in the Temple of Fine Arts' *Shakuntala*, at the Old Town Hall. And then I did a lot of theatre at school.

My parents took me to arts performances when I was a kid, not just theatre but music and dance, so I think I caught the bug quite early. And they were enormously supportive of my childhood forays into theatre. I remember my mother borrowed an audio recording of *Waiting for Godot* from the British Council library and played that in the car; I was transfixed by Lucky's speech. Years later I got a chance to play Lucky in a student production of *Godot* at university and I felt like I'd won the lottery.

MAQ: *What motivated you to become a writer/playwright? Who were your major influences in the early years of your writing?*

HS: I'm still in the early years of my writing, frankly. My early motivations are still the enduring reasons why I do it. I've always loved theatre. I acted a lot in school and I started directing there. I wrote my first play when I was about fifteen at a summer writing course, but I didn't write for the stage again until 1995 when I was invited to join the Instant Café Theatre Company, which did largely topical, political sketch comedy. That was interesting training because you learned to write pieces under a very tight deadline

and perform them to all sorts of audiences, from the wildly enthusiastic to the utterly indifferent. The year I spent performing and writing with them was a sort of boot camp — you learned to be disciplined and not precious, that the show must go on even if you've got a headache or you're in the middle of a huge argument about something inconsequential.

The first production of Jit Murad's *Gold Rain & Hailstones* was very inspirational. I loved the fact that he'd taken a subject and a milieu that was so personal to him, and had opened it up to an audience in such an intelligent and entertaining way.

I started Straits Theatre Company in 1996, but it wasn't until 1997 with my one-man show, *Lazy Hazy Crazy*, that I started writing things essentially just to please myself. My first full-length play, *Atomic Jaya*, came in 1998 and that was the point of no return, I suppose.

I came to writing from having been an actor, and I wanted to write good roles for actors that came out of a Malaysian reality. I was also reacting (perhaps over-reacting) to the trend in Southeast Asian contemporary theatre in the nineties that seemed to emphasise physicality and movement at the expense of language and text. My entirely megalomaniac goal was to restore to the playwright some of the privileges that had been gradually appropriated by the director. The irony, of course, is that I wound up directing my early work myself, and then when I began to work with other directors, like Krishen Jit, and later Claire Wong, they couldn't have been more respectful of the text. So in hindsight I'd gotten myself much too worked up. But it did give me a sort of youthful momentum.

MAQ: *How is literature and theatre important in this age of ingrained materialism and booming technological know-how? Do you think literature/theatre will survive the challenges it currently faces from the other forms of entertainment, such as video games, the internet, and the iPod?*

HS: Theatre is such a frighteningly vulnerable art form. You need a physical space, you need to get a bunch of people together in the same room, you need money, and in this part of the world you need the authorities' permission too. It's so crazily difficult to mount a play that you wonder why you do it ... but then when it works, it's amazing. There is something electric about live theatre and the power it has to transport an audience, to have them in tears or gales of laughter. You can feel the energy in the room. Nothing can replace the power and complexity of that shared experience, and that's why theatre people do it, and that's why there will always be a market for good theatre. Of course, bad theatre is completely criminal. A theatre professor at my university, used to say, 'I'd rather stay at home and masturbate than go and see a Broadway musical; it's cheaper, and you learn more about life'. I'm not so prejudiced against musicals, but I know what it's like to waste an evening watching bad theatre. Never mind the

money, that's two hours of your life you're never going to get back. So theatre makers have an incredible responsibility not to waste people's time.

What's interesting is that in this technologically depersonalised world we're seeing a resurgence in organised religion. People are looking for a communal experience that's bigger than themselves. That's something that theatre does very well too. And that's why I think there will always be a place for it.

MAQ: *Who do you write for? Does it affect you as a writer that Malaysians lack the habit of reading and going to theatre?*

HS: I write for myself, because I really have no idea what other people like. I've always just wanted to write the sort of play that I would want to go and see. So I'm always terrified that no one else will like it, and then I'm delighted and grateful when people appear to. I don't spend too much time thinking about the supposed shortcomings of the theatre-going public. Obviously, there are Malaysians and Singaporeans who do read, and there are Malaysians and Singaporeans who do go to the theatre, and they're my constituency, as it were. I'm not trying to drag people away from online poker games. Good luck to them, I say.

You've only got so much energy to expend on things. Rather than worrying about how to expand the audience base for theatre, we should be concentrating on making the best theatre we can for the existing audience.

MAQ: *What are your predominant interests as a writer/playwright? Do you start writing a play with an issue or idea in mind, or is it some theatre technique or some other interest associated with language and characterisation that acts as your primary inspiration? How do you negotiate between spontaneity and research in your writing?*

HS: I start with a topic I want to cover. I have a lot of things in my head; some date back a long time, some are recent. Through some mysterious organic process I arrive at what seems to be the most urgent topic for me to address. I then also try to think about the form to best serve that topic; that's where some authorial vanity comes in because I try to do something different each time, to push myself into a new area.

I tend to spend a lot of time researching, but then I'm quite happy not to use any of it. There's a lot of staring into space and appearing to do very little while I'm gestating the material, and this goes on for weeks. And then I write in a concerted burst for two or three weeks, day and night, often working until the sun comes up and then sleeping till lunch. I used to fret about this process but now I've just learned to accept it. At some point my subconscious takes over and the plays tend to write themselves. I don't want to appear as though I'm romanticising it, because there is a lot

of craft and analysis required, but that tends to happen after the first wave of creativity.

That's the sort of general process but it has varied considerably. For instance, in *Election Day*, a monologue I performed, Krishen Jit worked very closely with me; I improvised and worked out a rough plot with his guidance just before the 1999 Malaysian General Elections. Then I worked as a polling station volunteer on election day itself, taped all the results on radio that night, and wove my experiences and sound bites into the play over the next nine days before we opened. Damn scary it was too; I lost about ten pounds just from the stress and the adrenalin.

MAQ: *Can you comment on the role of creativity in contemporary Malaysia. Can a nation be creative when its culture is essentially derivative?*

HS: In my play *Notes on Life & Love & Painting*, the painter Rashid talks about how derivative the various aspects of Malaysian culture are — but only in order to oppose the sort of thing that Malaysian politicians and tabloid journalists do, which is to arbitrarily label something 'not Malaysian culture' in order to denigrate or exclude it. Those views are quite close to my own. The point is I don't see anything remotely shameful in ours being a country whose culture has been moulded by a million different foreign influences. I grew up in the shadow of Postmodern critical theory, so it's pointless talking to me about authenticity and originality! I think that Malaysia is a tremendously creative country, on an individual or community level. Of course, it's not very creative on an institutional level, but to be fair that's the same in every country.

MAQ: *Do you think the writer has a role in the formation of Malaysia's national identity? If so, what kind of an identity do you envisage for the country?*

HS: Something without electronic means of distribution is always going to have limited reach, so I'm not optimistic about the role a playwright or novelist can play in moulding the national identity. A filmmaker or a writer of pop songs can reach a far wider audience. Nevertheless, I want to see a Malaysia that can truly celebrate its cultural diversity and not be a political and economic battleground fought with weapons of ethnic chauvinism. I don't think we should be perpetuating colonial divide-and-rule policies by continually going back to race as the chief marker of identity. We should be Malaysians, full stop. If we have to do that through forced intermarriage, so be it...

MAQ: *What are some of the distinctive themes of contemporary Malaysian theatre in English?*

HS: I think we offer the same diversity of themes as any country's literature. Because the State is such a strong presence in our lives, you may see a few

plays that deal with government or social institutions, but I think that it can be a little dangerous to attempt to characterise Malaysian plays as dealing with certain concerns only. Over the years I have very much resisted attempts by journalists to characterise me as a political playwright. I have written about politics, yes, but only as one facet of the human condition.

MAQ: *Do you think Malaysia's language policy and censorship laws have impinged on the country's literary scene, especially in English? If so, how?*

HS: These are two separate issues and they're both quite big.

The fact that English doesn't officially exist means that if you write in English you don't officially exist, which is both a blessing and a curse. It's a curse because school children are not going to be taught your work nor will the government fund you. But it's a blessing, or at least used to be, because at the beginning of my career you could sort of operate under the radar within an enclosed safe space of students, intellectuals, and middle class professionals. But even that protective bubble isn't there anymore. More and more there's unwelcome scrutiny without any compensatory recognition.

The censorship policies are utterly ridiculous. Now, you have to look at it on two levels simultaneously. To begin with, I've always said that if you're a playwright, and you want to make theatre, you've got to make it within the realistic space that society gives you; there's no point sitting in your room and saying, 'Oh God, there're all these fantastic plays I would write if only there were no censorship'. Shakespeare worked under censorship. You've got to let the activists and the journalists and the opposition politicians fight for freedom of expression, but your job is to attend to your craft, and make whatever theatre you can. So that's on an individual level, on the professional level.

But — and this a very big but — there is no doubt whatsoever that on a national level the contemporary theatre scene is infinitely poorer because writers cannot address so many important subjects in society, such as politics and religion. Socrates said at his trial, 'The unexamined life is not worth living,' and calmly went to his death. In refusing to let Malaysians examine their own lives and their own society, the government is essentially robbing the culture of its vitality and its will to live.

MAQ: *You are perhaps best known for your play Atomic Jaya? Given the scathing criticism of Malaysian politics and culture it provides, did you have problems in getting permission to stage the play?*

HS: In 1998 City Hall gave *Atomic Jaya* a licence, and then I got a call from police headquarters asking me to come for an interview before they issued the licence. I told them that City Hall had already given me the licence.

Irritated and bored, the Inspector said that City Hall really should have checked with the police first, and that the next time I wanted to do a play I should call them first. Oh, of course, I said, and that was that. I never heard from them again.

A far more serious instance of government interference occurred with the 2004 production of *Election Day*, when the authorities refused to grant a licence to exactly the same script that had been licensed five years earlier unless I took out the names of everyone real in it. This ranged from Dr. Mahathir and Anwar Ibrahim² right down to Guardian Pharmacy and Volkswagen. This was an obvious attempt to disembowel the play and excise any relevance for the audience, and I was determined not to let this happen. To circumvent the ruling, I decided to have a lot of fun making up colourful epithets for the names that I couldn't say. Dr. Mahathir became 'Our Glorious Leader', and Dr. Wan Azizah³ became 'Our Gentle Lady In The Tudong', and so on.

Some people said we should have withdrawn the production entirely (to protest the censorship exercise) but I felt the only appropriate response to the stifling of creativity was the exercise of more creativity. In fact, several months later, when Claire Wong directed me in the same play in Singapore, the Singapore authorities, not wanting to offend Malaysia, insisted on the same changes (though they were sensible about Guardian Pharmacy and Volkswagen). But I found that the indirectness and colourfulness of the epithets made the play work even better for an audience that might not have attached much significance to the original names.

MAQ: *Why did you choose to tell a family story in Occupation, which deals with the most traumatic phase of Malaysian-Singaporean history, that is, the Japanese Occupation? Was it to provide a counter history and suggest that history is subjective and controvertible?*

HS: I had wanted to do a story about my maternal grandparents' experiences during the Japanese occupation for several years, and an opportunity arose with the Singapore Arts Festival in 2002. Years earlier my grandparents had done a series of interviews with the oral history collectors of the Singapore National Archives. Listening to those interviews, I noticed that the questioners never seemed to follow up on the things that I would have and they never seemed to acknowledge that an answer was slightly unusual. It was as though they had a preconceived idea of what the history should be and they were simply not hearing answers that told a different story. So while I certainly did not want to write a revisionist history I did think it was important to present a story that was more nuanced than your traditional Japanese Occupation narrative of suffering and death. So I juxtaposed the story of a fictional oral history collector with that of my

real life grandparents' courtship in order to explore what it means to write history.

Interestingly, a Japanese friend who had been helping me in the early stages of the project with research materials said, when he saw the finished piece, that it would be politically a very explosive and difficult production for Japanese audiences because they could accept a more obviously accusatory narrative — and, it was implied, have it flow off them like water off a duck's back — but if they were to see people falling in love and getting married in the midst of this occupation, it would be read as a far more subtle and damning comment on the war because it implied all the suffering that surrounded this moment of joy and innocence.

MAQ: *Where do you stand vis-à-vis the use of Manglish in local writing? Do you think excessive use of dialect might make our literature parochial and devoid of global interest?*

HS: I'm a firm believer in the idea that for a work of art to have truly transcendent, universal appeal it must first be relevant and true to a particular region or community. If you try and write a story that is universally understandable by foreigners you totally lose the chance to say something to Malaysians about Malaysia. The Scots and the Irish have always produced great drama in their dialects, and it is to a large degree comprehensible by others because they have exported their culture, and a sense of their culture, globally. So the solution is not for Malaysia to avoid *Manglish*, but for Malaysia to export *Manglish* and all the other glorious fusions and confusions that make up our national psyche, so that foreigners have a true picture of our complex society.

Great theatre always transcends time and place. The point is for us to write good plays. It's only bad theatre that is parochial and devoid of global interest.

MAQ: *Unlike the other forms of literature, theatre is essentially collaborative work, in which the playwright has to join forces with directors, actors and audience to realise the final product. Is that a strength or weakness of the medium?*

HS: This forced collaboration is one of the joys of the medium, if you have the right attitude to it.

There are skills that you need as a playwright that other writers don't because your work has to offer something not just to the final end user (the audience) but also to the artistic collaborators who are bringing the script to life. It's got to provide the spine and the colour of the work while being porous enough to allow for the talents of the director, actors and designers to add to the vision. You're writing for two audiences: the people performing the play and the people watching the play. If you overwrite and over-specify with a lot of stage directions you wind up killing the

possibility of anything fresh being added to it. Conversely if there are no markers at all in your writing you're very much open to terrible formless productions that rob the audience of time and money. So there's a fine balance.

In writing dialogue, you have to give actors enough of a hook to hang their performances on, but you shouldn't say everything with words. There must be room for the glances and shrugs and smiles that the actor will add that will say it far better than words. You've got to let the play breathe.

MAQ: *Is there a difference between theatre and drama in your mind? Why is it important for you to publish your plays, when the end of theatre is performance on stage?*

HS: The published text of a play exists on two levels. On one level it functions as a blueprint for future productions in the same way a cookbook functions as a blueprint for future meals. But a published play also stands as a work of art in its own right and as a form of literature that on the page transcends time and place. Shakespeare is the obvious example. It is very difficult to mount even a halfway decent production of a Shakespeare play, for example — they're quite complicated recipes, to extend the metaphor — but they are obviously enormously important literary works. That's the most extreme polarised case, but to a lesser extent the same principle applies to every playwright's work.

MAQ: *Explain for us your experiences as an actor and a director? Is it convenient to act in your own plays or to direct them?*

HS: I think if you start as an actor it offers you more tools as a writer and a director. You know what works on stage; you have a sense of whether a line is sayable or not. Looking at it from the perspective of the playwright, too, it's helpful to act in or direct your own plays because you feel you know them inside out.

More importantly, directing a play is a different skill and poses a different artistic challenge, which I also love. So, directing my own plays also makes me look at and work with the text through different artistic lenses, which is immensely satisfying.

Having said that, it is both terrifying and wonderful to watch other directors work with my text. This goes back to my earlier point about the importance of publishing plays. Because the play as literature has a life of its own, distinct from its three-dimensional life as a production, the hope is that it can have a long, happy life and become a classic — something that years, decades, centuries later will speak to a theatre practitioner who will be inspired to give it life on stage, and still be relevant. At first, I used to be a little protective of my plays. But then I realised I had to let them go and

find a life of their own. And it's been lovely to receive requests for them to be performed, and to know that they are being interpreted by all kinds of practitioners, from students to professional groups, and all over the world, including the UK and US.

MAQ: *How has your work evolved over the years? How are your recent plays different in theme or technique from the earlier ones?*

HS: I've tried to do something different each time, as I've said, so I've probably forced myself to evolve a little unnaturally. When I look back at my plays, I realise they are very much a reflection of who I was at that time. It's not that they're autobiographical per se, but they reflect my mental state and world view at that particular point in life. In 2002 when I was going back to edit my plays for publication, I found it impossible to make any revisions to them because they were so much a product of a certain time and place, it was as though they were written by a different Huzir, and it felt faintly transgressive to try to revise or 'update' them.

Keeping the craft fresh has always been important, so I always try to work with different themes and forms for each new play. I'm terrified of being bored and of being boring, at least in my work. So I try quite hard to bring something new to the table... all of which allows me to be very boring in real life.

I was once chiding my father for the regularity of his habits, and he quoted me something by Alvin Toffler or some such social theorist about how people who were creative and unstructured in their work were usually utterly boring and predictable in their daily habits, and of course like clockwork I find the same thing happening to me.

MAQ: *I have heard that you have written for film and television as well. Could you elaborate on this?*

HS: My first feature script, *Dukun*, was shot in Kuala Lumpur by Dain-Iskandar Said for Astro Shaw, and I'm working on two more in collaboration with my wife Claire⁴ — one on Rose Chan, the legendary stripper; and another on the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the Indian National Army. I've written and directed three short historical films that are part of the permanent collection of the History Galleries in the National Museum of Singapore. Over the years I've written a fair bit for television, including four one-hour telemovies for Singapore TV.

Writing for the screen is superficially similar to writing for the stage but they're actually very different disciplines. Screenwriting requires an enormous attention to how you tell the story with pictures, whereas the playwright's impulse is to always tell it with words which is of course fatal on screen. So I had to learn very quickly to access the visual side of storytelling.

That said, one of the problems with the current state of art house film making in Malaysia and Singapore is the distrust — almost a hatred — of language and acting. The trend seems to be that an art house film should have beautiful camerawork, long silences and wordless scenes. Why not make a film with swans, then, or better yet, molten lava? We're completely closing off one of the great parts of being human, which is communicating with language.

The irony, of course, is that in trying to get international funding for local films it is very difficult to get Western film producers to accept an Asian film where the characters speak good English. I've been told this again and again by industry people. Apparently, brown and yellow people should sound brown and yellow. It's surreal. I mean, you come here, you colonise us, you force us to learn your language, and then when we master it you don't want to hear us speak it?

But I'm not going to go the other way and deny who I am. I am an English-speaking Southeast Asian, and I'm proud of it. I will continue to tell those sorts of stories whenever I can.

MAQ: *Why have you moved to Singapore? How has the move helped you as a writer/playwright?*

HS: The initial and very personal reason was that this was where my wife lived. But Singapore has also been receptive to my work. I remember when Claire first performed *Atomic Jaya* at the Substation in 2001 I had eight offers of writing jobs that arose from that, including the commission for the Singapore Arts Festival.

I also have ties to Singapore in that my mother's family is from Singapore, and I always spent school holidays with my grandparents and aunts and uncles in the Republic. So I'm at an interesting crossroads where I'm not a Singaporean artist but I am a Singapore artist — while still obviously being Malaysian.

It's good to be away; it gives me a different perspective and a different set of stimuli which take me to different places as a writer. For instance, because Singapore has a slightly different relationship with its past than Malaysia does and appears to be more concerned with conservation, heritage and archiving, it has enabled me to tackle historical themes in plays like *Occupation* and *Colony of Singapore*.

I wrote *Colony of Singapore* in 2005, under my National University of Singapore (NUS), Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences-The Arts House Writing Fellowship. It's the story of the 1956 Singapore Constitutional Conference in London at which David Marshall led a Singaporean delegation to negotiate for independence with Britain's Colonial Office. I wrote it entirely using historical documents, editing and juxtaposing

newspaper accounts, radio broadcast transcripts, the Hansard of debates in the Legislative Assembly as well as a whole trove of declassified top secret British government dossiers and memos. All these resources were in the Singapore-Malaysia Collection of the National University of Singapore Library, which made it very convenient.

MAQ: *What are you working on now? What are your future plans?*

HS: I'm doing an increasing amount of consultancy for the arts and heritage sectors. At the moment I'm working with Montreal-based design firm GSM as the Creative Director of the Observation Deck on the 124th floor of Burj Dubai, the tallest building in the world. It's an enjoyable and challenging engagement, overseeing exhibition content, more than ten different audio-visual productions, a commissioned musical score — the works.

I teach playwriting at the National University of Singapore, and I'm very inspired by the work my students have been doing, both in the classroom and after they graduate. There's an interesting sort of renaissance going on in Singapore playwriting, and I'm happy to be doing my part to shepherd it or nudge it along. I'm also mentoring a student theatre group there.

On the writing front, I'm working on a play for Checkpoint, two feature film scripts, a novel, a hip-hop album, a graphic novel adaptation of *Atomic Jaya*, as well as newspaper columns. I wrote a long essay on the arts that was just published in Khazanah's *Readings in Malaysian Development*.

The calendar does get very packed! But it keeps me off the streets, I suppose...

NOTES

¹ The interview was updated in September 2009.

² Reference to a former Prime Minister (1881–2003) and Deputy Prime Minister (1993–1998) of Malaysia respectively

³ Dr. Wan Azizah is wife of former Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Anwar Ibrahim.

⁴ Sulaiman is married to Malaysian actress and director, Claire Wong.

WORKS CITED

Huzir Sulaiman 2002, *Atomic Jaya, Eight Plays*, Silverfishbooks, Kuala Lumpur, pp. 1–42.

SOHAIMI ABDUL AZIZ

The Development of the Popular Malay Cult Novel

INTRODUCTION

Since the late 1990s the popularity of the popular Malay cult novels in Malaysia has grown enormously. Writers of the popular cult novels such as Ramlee Awang Murshid, who were sidelined at one time, began to attract the attention of literary critics. They form the new wave of young writers who are becoming popular very quickly, taking advantage of a new segment of readers born in a society dominated by commercialism, urbanisation and technology. Popular Malay authors who write cult novels have also taken advantage of developments in information and communication technology that enhance the popularity of their works.

THE POPULAR CULT NOVEL AND POPULAR CULTURE

Writers of popular cult fiction base their writings on their readers' taste and their readers not only become avid fans but also extremely loyal to them even to the extent of creating home pages and blogs to communicate directly with the authors and with other fans. In Malaysia the success of the popular cult novel is due to the tremendous economic development of the country since the 1990s. Consumerism has grown in tandem with the physical, social and economic development of Malaysia. Consequently, adolescence has become the target of the capitalists because of their lifestyle and fashion consciousness. This development can also be seen in the materials they read, such as the popular magazines and novels. These young adults have better education and associated literacy skills, and also greater consuming power compared to the older generation. Consequently, the readership of the popular Malay cult novel has also grown proportionately and this development has a great impact on the commercialisation of the cult novel.

The commercial element of the popular cult novel is related to popular culture which is the dominant force in the appearance of this fiction. According to Jowett,

To succeed popular culture cannot stray far from the recognizable formula, or categories, because the audience will experience difficulty in relating to it: but it must also constantly provide an interesting variation on the theme. It is within the context of these recognizable categories, or genre, that all of popular culture is created.

(Jowett ii)

Popular culture has its roots in capitalism. In other words the popular cult novel is a business product of a capitalist economy with profit as the overriding aim; and, unlike the literature of high culture, the target of the capitalists is the mass

of readers who will read popular materials. Generally, the cult novel readers, who are mostly adolescents, read these novels for pleasure. Their knowledge of literature is minimal. In the Malaysian education system today, literature as a subject in high schools and universities has been marginalised. In schools, the brighter students are not encouraged to take literature classes. Parents have also contributed to this pattern of study because they believe that literature as a subject will not benefit their children's pursuit of a career. This system has produced only a small number of adolescents of high literary competency. Canonical literature is the domain of a higher culture representing a high aesthetic, intellectual and creative value. The self expression of the author is of prime importance; the mass reader is never the target. On the other hand the popular cult novel exists in a world of supply and demand. A high demand comes from the mass of readers who want stories that will fulfil their taste and cater to their preference and this in turn is exploited by the capitalists to earn good profits.

POPULAR MALAY CULT NOVELS AND WRITERS

Cult novels sell like hot cakes. The publication of the popular Malay cult novel is a part of a fast expanding industry known as the 'creative industry'. Malay writers of such fiction include Ramlee Awang Murshid, Norzailina Nordin, Liza Zahira, Aisya Sofea, Anis Ayuni, Sri Diah, Sharifah Abu Salem, Damia Hanna, Nobil Sulaiman, Mariam Abu Bakar, Siti Rosmiza and Kresya Resya.

Many local publishing companies such as Kaki Novel Enterprise Sdn. Bhd., Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd. (a subsidiary of KarangKraf Sdn. Bhd.), Buku Prima and Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd. (to name a few) have made creative writing an economic activity that generates handsome profits. Cult novels are sold in thousands of copies. To encourage writers of the cult novel to be more productive the publishing company Krangkraf Sdn. Bhd. via Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd. gives an award called the 'Gold Club Award' to writers of cult fiction. Those who have received the award include Aisya Sofea, Kresya Resya, Anis Ayuni, Sri Diah, Sharifah Abu Salem, Liza Zahira and Ramlee Awang Murshid. Each of these writers' novels has sold more than three hundred thousand ringgits. The market being small in Malaysia, three hundred thousand ringgit sales is considered a great achievement. This award also proves that they have the potential to garner a strong pool of cult readers. Local newspapers like *Berita Harian* also give awards to these writers based on their popularity.

Popularity is the main factor for giving such an award, and popularity is seen as having no regard for literary quality by serious readers who are intellectually mature and very particular about the aesthetic aspect of the literary text. When the main focus is on the taste of the readers or followers, the question of literary quality is of no importance. What is important is what the readers want. The cult novel is evaluated by the mass readers. Such a standard of judgment is also applied to the popular cult novel in Western countries such as America. If a work of fiction receives an extraordinarily high rating from the readers it is regarded as

a successful literary product and the rating can be seen in popular charts such as *Writer's Digest Book* (America). In Malaysia, the popularity of a novel is gauged by the number of reprinted editions and this type of rating is used by the publishers to promote their popular novels. These literary awards encourage writers of the popular cult novel to be more productive, which in turn maintains and 'grows' readership, which increases profits. The sustainability of the creative industry, particularly the creative writing industry, is directly related to the number of cult readers. Malay cult novels are being sold in big and established book shops such as Borders in Penang and Kuala Lumpur and MPH Bookstores Sdn. This phenomenon was once rare, but lately, even local restaurants are interested in selling Malay cult novels. These new environments have created new opportunities for the development of the popular Malay cult novel.

Why are there so many readers of the cult novel? The most basic and important answer is, cult novel writers write to please and fulfil the taste of their followers or readers. The cult novelist pays particular attention to readers who are familiar and at ease with such products. Among the sub-genres of the cult novel attracting the interest of mass readers are fantasy, mystery, horror, romance, travel, science fiction and the thriller. Generally, romance is the most popular sub-genre of the cult novel. But sub-genres that feature characters that conform to the super hero type, are also enormously popular. Ramlee Awang Murshid is famous for his popular cult novels which blend a number of sub-genres such as thriller, mystery, revenge and mystical, but also follow the super-hero model of popular film and comics. Malay popular cult novels by Ramlee are very local in content and this can be seen from the characters used. Ramlee uses familiar historical events (like the occupation of Malacca by the Portuguese), local places (like Kuala Lumpur, Sepang, Hulu Melaka and Istana Melaka [Malacca Palace]), characters like the Sultan of Malacca, and those drawn from the legends of Hang Tuah, Hang Lekiu and Puteri Gunung Ledang.

Ramlee has created a character by the name of Laksamana Sunan who appears in the tetralogy novel series that includes, *Bagaikan Puteri* (2005), *Cinta Sang Ratu* (2007), *Hijab Sang Pencipta* (2008) and *Cinta Sufi* (2010). Laksamana Sunan has the characteristics of a super hero, being skilful in self-defense (*bersilat*); having the ability to foresee the future; and being an all round 'good guy'. Another super-hero type character is Tombirou, who appears in the trilogy *Tombiruo* (1998). He is as an ugly-looking guy, with a good heart who fights illegal logging. Ramlee's cult readers love these characters because they operate within the convention of the super hero, and in order to meet the high demand of avid readers, Ramlee maintains a steady stream of serial/sequel novels which generates substantial profit.

But although each sub-genre adheres to a specific formula in its creation, and thus it is said that popular cult fiction is formulaic and is less open to experimentation than literary fiction, some of these genres overlap. Ramlee's novels for example, include several sub-genres, as seen in his most recent work, *Cinta Sufi*. This cult

novel is the fourth of the *Bagaikan Puteri* tetralogy. Each novel of the tetralogy takes a different theme, and the superhero, Laksamana Sunan, is positioned against a different background and with a different antagonist. In other words, while not deviating from its basic conventions, there is room in the popular cult novel for invention. The role of convention is explained by Jowett:

The conventions ensure that the subject matter falls into a recognizable and comfortable category, while the inventions provide the surprise (which can either be in the narrative, or in the aesthetics of presentation) which differentiates this item from the many others competing for the public's attention and money. (Jowett vii)

Jowett is not speaking specifically about Malay cult novels, but the stereotypical characteristics are easily identified. The cult novel follows generic conventions but allows space for the author's creativity. That creativity can be found for example in the variety of backgrounds against which a super hero like Tombiruo moves and the various antagonists he encounters. These changing scenarios allow the author to reflect upon and engage with the contemporary and shifting concerns of his audience. The problems upon which his novels focus, and the means used by his protagonist to solve them, then serve to differentiate him from other authors writing within the same convention.

As mentioned earlier, the cult novel has many sub-genres such as romance and crime mystery both of which neatly fulfil the conventions so the writing produced does not spring any surprises on readers who have acquired a taste for a form that must conform to their expectations. However there is still a need for invention so as to create a uniqueness that establishes the identity of the writer, and sets him or her apart from other cult writers in the eyes of the readers.

THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA

In Malaysia, the Malay writers of the cult novel have taken advantage of the new media such as the internet, facebook and blogging to encourage a more dynamic interaction with their readers. Nowadays, almost all the popular Malay cult writers have their facebook or blog site. Ramlee's fans created a club called the Ramlee Awang Murshid Fan Club (RAMFC) which holds various activities such as meeting the author, thereby creating an effective communication channel between Ramlee and his readers. But through use of the new media — in this case the creation of a home page (<http://www.kelabram.com>) — the club also brings readers together who are geographically scattered throughout Singapore, Brunei and Indonesia as well as Malaysia. The homepage created an e-space in which fans could discuss the author, his works and current activities organised by RAMFC. The club holds activities like 'The Exploration Race', which is currently popular on television, in which participants search for the *keris* (a Malay traditional weapon of self-defence) named Nagroe in the tetralogy, *Bagaikan Puteri*. In this game, participants take on the names of the various characters in the tetralogy such as Laksamana Sunan, Haryani, Maharani, Putri Kober

Gandring and Maggala and enact similar scenarios to those played out in the novels. Fans become active participants in the life of the various novel series that is not limited to the adventures imagined by Ramlee himself. To some extent fans become acolyte authors, mimicking and guided by their author-hero.

Ramlee himself communicates through email with his readers via the home page of Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd. Email communication like this allows readers to take part in the creative process — their deep personal investment in the lives of the characters and associated constructive criticism can influence future novels in the series or the genre. Here is an example of an email correspondence between Ramlee (RAM) and one of his readers:

Normaiza: I would like to suggest to Mr. Ramlee that he write another novel, a continuation of the *Bagaikan Puteri 3*, where Sunan and Haryani meet in a new story. This is because I have just read *Cinta Sang Ratu*, but I don't feel there is a continuation from *Bagaikan Puteri*.

RAM: Insyallah the 'hijab' will be unveiled.
[Here RAM promises to satisfy a reader's desire to hear more of the story of Sunan and Haryani in the next novel – the mystery of their disappearance will be uncovered.] (<http://www.alaf21.com.my> [my translation])

RAMFC and the home page created for him by the publisher have increased Ramlee's readership and celebrity status. Contributing to this effect are the 'cult readers' who set up their own pages and blogs so that they can comment on the novels: see for example the home page created by a Ramlee fan at <http://www.kelabram.com> or Lizz, at <http://whiteharajuku.blogspot>, who writes about how she/he was attracted to Ramlee's novels. According to the blog writer, *Bagaikan Puteri* attracted him/her to read Ramlee's other novels, one of the reasons for the attraction being Ramlee's writing style which incorporates different sub-genres in a single text. In another blog, Alias Padzil's fanatical admiration of Ramlee's novels demonstrates the author's cult status:

As an avid fan of Ramlee Awang Murshid the last month has been full of anticipation as I wait for his new novel. The book *9 Nyawa* inspired by his son will hit the market soon, but I may not be able to be the first reader this time as in the case of the novel *Hijab Sang Pencinta*... I love to read the type of books produced by brother Ramlee. They are so different and full of suspense. The occasional religious sentiment does shake the spirit of the reading. This makes it more interesting for me, for us readers this aspect is the magnetic attraction to his works. At one time while reading *Hijab Sang Pencinta* the puzzling ending drove us crazy, including me. What is more, this is a trilogy so the end will come after three books, but I feel that there ought to be a continuation. And three months ago my sister (Ilya Kuantan) informed me about *Cinta Sufi* [the last of the tetralogy]. ([my trans] <http://datomarsani.blogspot>)

As a writer of the cult novel, Ramlee has many fanatical readers who love his novels, and, like Alias Padzil, they will wait with great anticipation for the arrival of the next novel. The new media has created a new wave of cult readers that contributes to the development of the popular Malay cult novels. Fans of these

writers utilize the new media to get in touch with each other and thereby build a huge and powerful network that feeds into and sustains the creative industry. The writers themselves, in their active involvement in the new media, participate in this circuit, for Ramlee of course is not the only popular Malay cult novel writer to promote his works and communicate with his fans through the new media.

CONCLUSION

The popular Malay cult novel is reader, author and publisher-driven. Cult readers consume popular Malay cult novels but not all popular Malay novels are cult novels. The continuous appearance of cult novels in trilogy and tetralogy forms is a sign of the growth of popular Malay cult novels in Malaysia. Although the story itself, and its popularity with readers, is the paramount aspect of the product's success, the willingness of the author to involve him or herself with readers also appears to be integral. Ramlee is a good example of this process. The cult writer writes to satisfy the literary taste of his/her readers and this becomes a strong creative force. The readers wait loyally for the latest cult novel. The interactive capacity of the new media to build the relationship between reader and author has accelerated the development and proliferation of the popular Malay cult novel. Although readers have some influence on authors of cult novels through this interactive media, the co-operation between publisher and author, and the twin forces of capitalism and consumerism, nevertheless operate to lure and cultivate a seemingly unquenchable urge in readers to consume popular fiction that ultimately discourages any aspiration to or desire for novels of higher literary quality.

WORKS CITED

- Jowett, Garth S. 1992, 'Series Editor's Introduction', *Theories and Texts: Foundation of Popular Culture Vol. 2*, ed. Arthur Asa Berger, SAGE Publications, Newbury Park, pp. vii–viii.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 1998, *Tombiruo*, Alaf 21 Sdn. Bhd: Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2001, *Semangat Hutan (Spirit of The Jungle)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2004, *Tombiruo Terakhir (The Last Tombiruo)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2005, *Bagaikan Puteri (Like A Princess)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2007, *Cinta Sang Ratu (Love of the Queen)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2008, *Hijab Sang Pencipta (Veil of the Creator)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- Ramlee Awang Murshid 2010, *Cinta Sufi (Sufi Love)*, Alaf 21 Sdn Bhd, Selangor.
- 'What Is Cult Fiction', online. <http://www.wisageek.com/what-is-cult-fiction.htm>, accessed 11th July 2010.

RUZY SULIZA HASHIM & SHAHIZAH ISMAIL HAMDAN

Facets of Women in Malay Romance Fiction

INTRODUCTION

In this essay, we analyse four Malay romance novels within the context of the debate on high literature versus popular literature in Malaysia. We also discuss the images and portrayals of Malay women, the chick lit phenomenon and the formulaic romance plot to examine gender relations as well as the role of contemporary Malay romance novels as a potential space to express women's voice and experience.

The number of Malay novels written by women in the Malay literary scene has steadily risen although it has not matched the output of male writers. One disturbing indication of women's lack of literary output is the absence of a female recipient of the National Laureate Award since its inception in 1981. All ten recipients have been men, although there is quite a number of women writers such as Salmi Manja, Khatijah Hashim, Zaharah Nawawi, Fatimah Busu and Azmah Nordin who have produced memorable serious novels.

In recent times, however, popular novels, identified primarily by glossy covers, have been gracing bookstores, big and small. In fact, they outnumber literary Malay novels. Mainstream writers label this kind of writing as *novel picisan* — poor quality writings or mass market 'schlock' which have very little literary merit. These novels equate to women's dime novels which thrived in the United States of America from 1870 to 1920. The term 'dime novels' arose from the affordable price of the works and the audience they targeted which consisted of mainly the working class. Malay popular fiction has many labels — dime fiction, pulp fiction, popular fiction — because of its appeal to the masses, especially women. While there has been an absence of scholarly research in this area, newspaper reports and information of book sales show that these books are amongst the bestsellers. In one newspaper report dated 29 September 2010, a writer of popular novels, Fauziah Ashari, sold 150,000 copies of her second novel *Ombak Rindu (Waves of Melancholy)* which is being made into a movie. She says:

I like to convey messages to my readers... If I write with flowery language, my books will only appeal to certain quarters and I do not want that. So I write in a style that will appeal to a big crowd. I am using a language that the masses will understand. In my novels, I am always conveying the truth about life and motivating my readers to lead a better and more truthful life. (Bisme online)

Fauziah articulates the sentiments of many writers of the same genre. Their stories of love and relationships revolve around characters many readers recognise and with whom they can empathise. The easy language and story lines with their many turning points and climactic moments provide a diversion from the gravity of some of the more serious, literary novels. These literary texts are mainly reserved for schools and tertiary syllabi where every word and metaphor is considered in detail. But these literary works have a small reading audience. The bookstores in Malaysia such as Kinokuniya and Borders provide a larger section for Malay popular fiction because they are the kinds of books that sell. Furthermore, the reprinting of these popular novels shows their attractiveness. Ironically, the emergence of this genre is breathing life into a sagging book industry.

Malaysia's neighbour, Indonesia, has a bigger market for its popular fiction industry. According to Rachel Donadio, this fiction (known as *sastra wangi* — fragrant literature) 'has been gaining popularity since the fall of the authoritarian Suharto regime in 1998' (Donadio 2). But Rachel Donadio is quick to point out that *sastra wangi* is not 'chick lit per se', although it is 'quite frank in its treatment of sex and politics' (2). Chick lit, the Malaysian variety, does not exist within the same breath as American chick lit. Sexual liberation or experimentation, such as one might see in American chick lit novels, does not appear in the Malaysian corpus. The Islamic environment does not allow for a sexual relationship without marriage, and therefore portrayals of such relationships, when they do happen, merely serve to demonstrate the consequences of such transgressions.

Nevertheless, it is useful here to compare the new writing tradition in Malaysia to American chick lit or as some well-known writers such as Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing term it, 'chickerati'. Chick lit, as defined by Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, can be understood to be a 'form of women's fiction on the basis of subject matter, character, audience, and narrative style' (3). It took off in the mid-1990s after the appearance of Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* and television shows such as *Ally McBeal* and *Sex and the City*. *Bridget Jones's Diary*, for example, sold at an amazing rate, topping bestseller lists. In America, the chick lit phenomenon has been called a 'commercial tsunami' (Zernike online) as it would seem that chick lit has overtaken the sales of literary novels.

Proponents of chick lit, such as Alana Albertson, Chris Bailey and Lori McDonald label the writings as 'hippest romance sub-genre' (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/>). The Chick Lit Writers group, another website promoting chick lit, is a cyber place where a chick-lit writer or fan can mingle with other authors and fans who argue that their unique sub-genre does not play by the traditional romance rules (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/our-history/>). The moderator further claims that: '[w]e share a common goal: to make the romance writing world aware that chick lit is not a flash in the pan, a fading trend, but a hip, hot, happening genre that is here to stay' (<http://chicklitwriters.com/our-purpose/>). The plots of chick lit novels focus on a young woman who finds the love of her life but she does not always follow the conventionalities of romance.

These women are usually hip and stylish, in their twenties or thirties, live in urban settings, and fall in and out of love repeatedly. The books usually feature an irreverent tone and frank sexual themes. Chick-lit heroines are more flirtatious and sexually more experimental than Mills-and-Boons-type women who are shown to be more clear-headed, and do not engage in multiple relationships.

A venerated novelist like Doris Lessing has shown disdain for what she calls ‘chickerati’, saying that it would have been better if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight’ (qtd in Ferris and Young 2). But Ferris and Young claim that chick lit reflects the lives of young men and women and appeals to readers who want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today (3). The typical chick lit protagonist is not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers’ compassion and identification. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humour that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible, and very much like the young women readers who share the same priorities. As Amelia Hill observes that ‘the greatest publishing phenomenon to sweep America ... features a new heroine, the young woman who is seriously overweight — and doesn’t care... This new genre is proof that women are finally learning to love each other and themselves — warts and all. Chick lit is finally holding a real mirror up to its readers, and they can’t get enough of it’ (online). ‘The heroines of these books can be rude, shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above — but we love them anyway!’ (chicklit.us). The women of the Malay variety of chick lit however are not always as unconcerned about their looks and certainly not as transgressive although these novels have more sexual content than the conventional literary books published locally.

Despite the appeal to the masses, these works remain unacknowledged by mainstream literary criticism in Malaysia because they are not considered worthy of entry in a reputable canon. Yet, we argue that these books can be read as part of the hidden history of women’s reading in Malaysia due to their popularity amongst women readers. The sales and reprinting of these novels further show their popularity and appeal to the general public. By exploring these novels, we are able to show the reading preferences of women readers and the kinds of characters they identify with which confirm their inclinations towards stereotypical depictions and neat closures of gender relationships.

THE ROMANCE CONTINUUM

This essay focuses on two varieties of romance fiction, exemplified by the novels *Aroma Hati* (Aroma of the Heart) written by Zahura Zakry and *Kirana* by Sarimah Bardon, which are considered to be ‘serious’ because they are produced by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, and *Pesona Kasih Riana* (Memorable Love of Riana) by Zurilawati Ku Zaifah and *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota*, (A Photo, a Note) by Cathoilda Sibin, which are truly ‘popular’ because they are produced in big numbers by Creative Enterprise and Tintarona Publications respectively.

Although all four novels fall within the genre of romance, each of the publishing houses which circulates the novels has a significant place in the Malaysian publication landscape. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (The Institute of Language and Literature) is a government agency which is responsible for forming policies and matters regarding the Malay language and literature. It has a publishing arm that produces dictionaries, encyclopaedias and other books including literary works. Because of its role and importance, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka is the body that determines the National Laureate as well as other literary awards such as the coveted SEAWrite Award.¹ Fiction published by the institute is regarded as highly literary. It is only in recent years that Dewan Bahasa has bent its rigid principles and begun to publish novels that many consider to be within the 'popular' or 'romance' genre. Some critics see this flexibility as betraying the principles upon which Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka was instituted. Mohd Affandi Hassan claims that 'the biggest contribution of these popular "laureates" is to diminish literariness and deaden the mind of its audience, to proliferate works that are of little value, and to privilege trivialities of life' (online [our trans]). There are many who share his belief that the rise and popularity of popular fiction will give birth to generations of escapist readers. They fear that popular discourse will lull readers into worldly gratification which is against Islamic principles.

But as chick lit books take the world by storm (in Malaysia amongst readers who are proficient in English as well as in America), the influence they have on local writers is phenomenal. Publishing houses such as Creative Enterprise, Tintaron Publications and Alaf 21 are amongst competing production houses which churn out romance novels by the thousands on a monthly basis. The easy availability of these books with their glossy covers and heart-rending blurbs has been crucial to the penetration of a large section of the Malaysian audience. Although no studies have been carried out on the influence of chick lit on Malaysian writers, the sudden increase of romance fiction soon after the popularity of *Bridget Jones's Diary* implies the effect of the chick lit genre in Malaysia. Malaysian readers who are not proficient in English and not able to read chick lit novels which are best sellers in many Malaysian bookstores turn to Malay romance as a substitute.

POPULAR CULTURE

Popular culture is usually associated with ordinary people, who have little regard for exalted culture such as haute couture, fine dining or fine classical music. The pervasiveness of the mass media, of which we are all avid consumers, diminishes the idea that popular culture is separate from high culture or the culture of educated elites who show disdain for popular culture. High culture is often distinctly associated with exoticism, particularly in terms of language, art, dance, music, and cuisine. But popular culture in Malaysia shows irreverence for anything exotic. Instead, it privileges the ordinary and deconstructs the meaning of culture itself. Although high and popular culture are understood as a binary opposition in the sense that the former is associated with class and finesse and

the latter is connected to tastelessness and indiscretions in Malaysia, the impact of popular culture on everything we do has been overwhelming. In the context of the Institute of Malay Language and Literature, for example, it has had to bring on board some of the more popular albeit less literary materials in a bid to stay afloat in a market where popular novels are doing great business. Indeed, it is now generally accepted that culture is a substratum of identity from which no member of society is immune. Within the global context as well, universities are offering programmes in popular culture which shows a rejection of elitist values, and an acceptance of blurring of genres and class. In the process, culture has acquired a much broader meaning within academic discourses, for it is understood to encompass all social and political institutions and practices, together with associated belief systems, rendering them the proper subject of scrutiny and critique.

What is the nature of the popular messages ‘consumed’ by the readers of romance fiction? In the case of chick lit, the novels affirm flawed women, acknowledging their insecurities and offering lessons in negotiating relationships. They show that women, no matter how successful or liberating, crave for a fairy tale relationship. Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women’s struggles in patriarchal culture and to offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the realities of young and impressionable women grappling with modern life and its demands. Is the Malay variety of chick lit advancing the cause of feminism by appealing to female audiences and featuring empowered, professional women? Or does it repeat the same patriarchal narrative romance and performance of femininity that feminists once rejected?

IMAGES OF MALAY WOMEN

Previous studies of women in Malaysia show that Malay women are marginalised, weak and easily manipulated. For example, Ismail Sarbini highlights women in *Sejarah Melayu* as being ‘accorded a low status; they are repeatedly forced to accommodate men’s sexual pleasures, are used in exchanges between men as gifts of appreciation, become souvenirs of political bargaining, and are also targets of malicious rumours’ (1990 44). Sharifah Zaleha and Rashila Ramli (1998) concur with this observation; their own work classifies women as village dwellers, court dwellers, and supernatural hags. Women’s identity, they argue, is determined by their sex and work (5). Their representations show them to be the weaker sex and easily manipulated. Ruzy Suliza Hashim’s (2003) study on women of the court unveils women as key players in court politics although they occupy only a peripheral place in the chronicles. By scrutinizing the women’s (muted) presence in a number of historical chronicles produced between the 16th and 18th centuries, Ruzy reveals how the women court dwellers actually generate male prestige and power, political hierarchy, social identity, and legitimacy.

While it is unsurprising that ancient Malay women were oppressed and subjugated, surely modern Malay women have moved on? Siti Hawa Salleh's 1992 study on women in modern Malay literature shows that writers privilege women who possess beauty, loyalty and faithfulness, and are determined to protect the family and family honour. She gives two reasons for this continuity of the images of women: the persistence of adat laws and the requirements of Islam. Siti Hawa argues that like the Muslim tenets, Malay adat requires women to be subservient and self-sacrificing. Rosnah Baharuddin's research on female discourse, published in 2003, reveals a similar pattern — women who fulfil the traditional roles are privileged over those who deviate from them. It is expected that Malay women will put their own happiness aside in deference to the wants and needs of their husbands and parents.

The research of Roziah Omar and Azizah Hamzah (2003) shows an ironic contrast between a woman's professional space and her domestic space: women's participation in education and in the workforce has increased tremendously, but instead of becoming 'emancipated subjects' educated, urban, married Malay women reworked their strategies. They pursued the Islamic way of life with a certain amount of adjustment and accommodation. These women maintained adat and Islamic discourses that view the man as the head of the household, and assert that it is the duty of the husband to provide the welfare of the wife and the family. In turn, the woman is expected to cherish her duty as the obedient wife, her main duty being to bear her husband's children, look after the family and maintain her modesty, carefully guarding her sexuality and faithfulness. In sum, their research shows that an educated, urban, married Malay woman still holds strongly to her role as the dutiful wife and mother despite the fact that she is educated, financially independent and holds an important position in the public domain. (117) Their research shows that Malay women still adhere to traditional role models and expectations. Omar's interviews with professional women reveal that these women forget their professional identities the moment they reach the driveway. Once home, they take on the wife and mother identity wholeheartedly.

Fuziah Kartini and Faridah Ibrahim (1998), in their analysis of women in 1950s Malay films show two opposing representations of women — as poison (*racun*) and as antidote (*penawar*). Women as poison are typically shown as sexualised and materialistic. They are contrasted with women who are antidotes — sweet-tempered, virginal and patient, loving, supportive and sacrificing. In her 2006 study of Malaysian films, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues that:

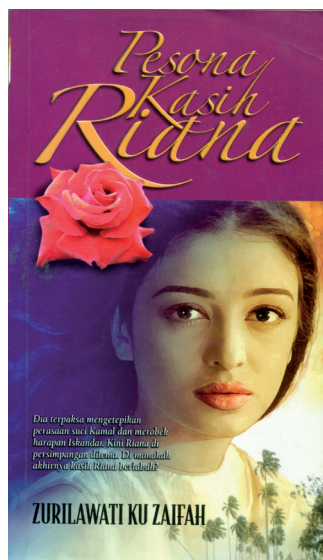
In this schema, there is a certain asexuality that is ascribed to the traditional positive female stereotype — the *penawar*. The fresh-faced actor Deanna Yusoff best exemplifies this image when she appears as the heroine in Shuhaimi Baba's films, *Selubung* and *Ringgit Kasorrga*. She is attractive and innocent compared to Tiara Jacqueline's character, Meera, a model/high-class prostitute. In *Ringgit Kasorrga*, both women vie for one man, and unsurprisingly, it is the prostitute, Meera, who dies, since sexualized women are punished for their moral and sexual transgressions in classical narratives. (114)

The didacticism of these films is overt, serving to show that while women can engage in transgressive behaviours they will not escape punishment, thus reminding the audience of the Malay-Muslim principles governing every deed.

The four novels we have chosen to examine show successful Malay women trying to juggle their professional lives with their personal relationships. Having looked at the scholarly work available on the images of Malay women in the tradition of 'high' literature, we will go on to compare the images of women in contemporary 'high' literature to the Malay variety of chick lit, with its promising illustrations of hip Malay women, to see whether Malay women have moved on from the fates suffered by their less modern sisters.

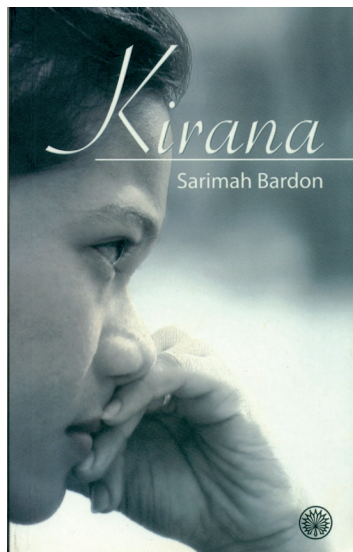
PACKAGING

Book covers are important to the marketing of popular romance fiction in Malaysia: they are often brightly coloured and feature such images of chicness as trendy clothes and accessories. The characters in the novels drive fast and fancy cars, live in penthouses, eat gourmet food, and are global players. The covers portray an image of the sexy, desirable hip young protagonist with whom the reader is meant to identify. An illustration of a woman which takes up the whole page illuminates the focus on a female main character and is suggestive of a plot that makes her desires and motivations the focus of her story. The blurb of each cover highlights the main conflict of the protagonist — will she get the love of her life? A typical blurb claims: 'I love him so much. He is the only one I want in my life' (She had to set aside Kamal's pure love and devastate Iskandar's hopes. Now Riana is at a crossroad. Where does her love finally reside?)' (blurb of *Pesona Kasih Riana* [our trans.]).



The cover of *Pesona Kasih Riana* features an attractive woman with full lips that many Malay women would envy. The image of a blooming rose completes the picture of a young woman on the threshold of her life. Such illustrations of young women at the threshold of success are merely illusive. The heroine may look confident and attractive but within the pages the protagonist loses her self confidence as she changes into a dishevelled character with a victim mentality who is actually very successful in her professional life yet miserable in her personal life.

The covers of the Dewan Bahasa novels, on the other hand, do not portray women in a manner that exhibits the protagonist's sexuality. *Kirana* shows a picture of quite an 'ordinary' woman in terms of personal appearance, devoid of embellishments which would make the novel



look cheap. However, the seriousness of the covers of these ‘high culture’ novels does not equate with a more complex characterisation of the female protagonists. The two women in *Kirana* and *Aroma Hati* are women of substance because they are enterprising women who have succeeded in their business ventures. However, their private lives are beset with misadventures. Alisya in *Aroma Hati*, for example, is unable to balance her professional life as an entrepreneur with her duties as a wife and mother. At the beginning of the narrative, she is shown to be a dutiful wife and mother, but as she becomes more successful, she begins to forget her primary roles. Finally, she seeks divorce but is reconciled with her husband at the end of the story. She is shown to be a short-sighted woman who has excellent

business skills but loses sight of the importance of marital happiness. In *Kirana*, the protagonist also becomes a successful business woman but her private life too is in a shambles. The same kind of tumultuous personal lives that each of the protagonists experiences, whether the novel is deemed popular or serious, shows Malay women to be unable to maintain their work-life balance, and suggests by implication that the attempt to do so is misguided.

PLOT

The most important element of both kinds of romance novel is the formulaic plot — hero and heroine live ‘happily ever after’. The pleasure for the readers is that they can follow the couple through their ups and downs to a final destination where the two profess their true love for each other. Before they reach that finale, though, the woman faces various tribulations (so does the man, but to a lesser degree). Some plots are more adventurous than others, allowing the reader to experience quite dramatic circumstances that increase the uncertainty that the heroine will end up with the man she has fallen in love with. This charting of events also allows the reader to follow more than just the heroine’s romantic life. These novels draw on many aspects of a woman’s life — family, work and friendship. Coincidentally, three out of the four novels analysed for this essay have one thing in common — the female protagonists come from adverse backgrounds. Of the popular novels, the protagonist Riana (from *Pesona Kasih Riana*), is the adopted daughter of a poor but honest woman. Riana is an illegitimate child and her biological mother dies very soon after her birth. *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota* depicts a young woman who suspects that she is adopted and discovers her true identity towards the end of the novel. In both cases, the heroines suffer

unrelenting ill fortune before they succeed and prove to their respective enemies their worth. Both women suffer a similar dilemma — who to choose as their respective husbands? In *Pesona Kasih Riana*, for instance, Riana agrees to a contract marriage (*mutaah* marriage) to obtain RM15000 to pay for her mother's surgery. At the wedding though, once her identity as a poor lavatory cleaner is exposed, she suffers extreme humiliation, while her husband fails to defend her poor background. The marriage takes place but the couple's relationship falls apart. For five years, while Riana struggles to make ends meet and eventually becomes a successful cosmetic producer, her husband Johan's whereabouts is unknown. It is only revealed later that he has gone to Japan and built a successful business there. No effort is made on his part to locate his estranged wife. She dutifully remembers her wedding anniversary and buys a cake each time. Although another man, Iskandar, comes into her life, saves her from being raped, provides her with capital to start her business and waits for five years for her to accept his proposal, in the end she chooses the estranged Johan over Iskandar. She conveniently forgets her humiliation, his absence and his misdemeanours. Readers are positioned to see Riana's perspective and to accept her choice of Johan as the love of her life and the correct choice. This novel fulfils the formulaic 'happy-ending' of romances. Riana sacrifices her love for Iskandar to maintain her role as dutiful wife and is shown to be happy with her reunion with her long lost husband. This plot negates the agency apparently given to the woman; she conforms to the stereotypical image of the suffering woman who is rewarded in the end for her capacity to endure and accept that suffering.

The work of 'high' literature, *Kirana*, employs a similar plot. Kirana marries an Indian Muslim man, Suhail, who deserts her on the pretext that he has to return to India to look after his parents, leaving her to fend for herself and her children. He promises to return but years go by and he does not come back. During the twenty years of his absence, Kirana suffers all kinds of emotional trauma and unwanted male attention only to discover that her husband has migrated to England and opened up a number of restaurants there. It is revealed that health problems have encouraged Suhail to believe his wife will reject him; but through the goodwill of a man who happens to see Kirana's photograph at one of her husband's restaurants, Kirana and her husband are brought together again. The years of separation have not lessened her love for him, and she accepts him willingly despite the misery of being abandoned for two decades.

In both novels, the husbands are absent for a very long time. Yet, the women are shown to wait patiently and reject other men's advances — even when these other men are perceived as good — because they privilege loyalty to their husbands above all else. Strict Islamic laws allow for dissolution of a marriage in the event that a husband does not provide *nafkah* (food, money, lodging, sexual intimacy), yet the message of both novels is that women's patience and virtue will be finally rewarded. While Islamic laws provide an avenue for women to dissolve their marriages to absent husbands, Malay authors prefer to show long suffering

wives who remain virtuous throughout their ordeal. While on the one hand this conveniently brings into sharp focus the women's strength as they battle with various obstacles in their lives, on the other hand, this kind of plot resolution does not show the women's capacity to seek the love of other men.

CATEGORIES OF WOMEN

In both varieties of romance novel good characters are often pitted against bad characters to make the chain of events more engaging. It is interesting then to compare the depictions of good and bad women. Both categories of women in the novels are fashion-conscious, beautiful and successful in their own ways. Good women are shown as beautiful and they experience turbulent times before they are rewarded for their patience and virtue. Bad women are characterised as bad homemakers and sexually promiscuous. For example, Sophie, one of Riana's rivals in *Pesona Kasih Riana*, is an alcoholic and a smoker, is lazy and undisciplined:

Mouldy smell permeated the living room. Dirty clothes were strewn on the bed and hung up untidily behind the door. Underwear and bras were left in the pail. They were also mouldy. The kitchen was smelly and messy. Cockroaches ran here and there. Maggots crawled out of dirty dishes in the sink. A foul smell emanated from the pots.
(16–17)

Nida, another one of Riana's rivals, is also shown to be a bad homemaker and obsessed with buying gold. Her husband returns from work looking for food, and is frustrated with his wife's laziness: 'Nordin took off the lid of the rice cooker. It was empty. He opened a tin of biscuit. Also empty. The bread bin was empty. There was not a drop of water in the kettle or the thermos' (15). A bad woman is always equated with being a bad homemaker.

Depraved women do not have a place in either kind of romance novel. They die or get abused. Sophie in *Pesona Kasih Riana* commits suicide, and Nida is abused by her husband until her beautiful nose is broken. Instead of empathising with Nida, the compliant reader is positioned to rejoice in her fate: 'Nordin's hand rose easily to slap Nida's soft face. He shouted as loudly as possible, pushed Nida with all his manly power. He was incensed with anger' (6). The narrative voice guides the reader to understand Nordin's course of action:

Nordin was not totally at fault. Which husband can endure being sworn at day and night? Nothing sweet came out from his wife's lovely mouth. Her foul and vulgar words tested the limits of his patience. His manhood was wounded with his wife's loud voice and uncouth language. (6)

Having caused (apparently justifiable) injury to his wife, Nordin disappears from the story, but despite being abused by her husband, Nida does not take stock of her domestic problems, rather she concentrates on the execution of her plan for Riana's downfall. Although Riana has a community of women from whom she seeks help, they are mostly elderly women who do not provide competition for her success or beauty, whereas young beautiful women like Sophie and Nida are

delineated as rivals in both love relationships and career development. Readers are served the age-old formula of women competing against women for one man.

In *Aroma Hati*, the bad woman is Myra, the protagonist's business partner who schemes to break up her friend's marriage and ruin her business. Single and aggressive, she is not interested in being married and having children. She focuses her whole energy on her work and getting rich. While others can see through Myra's conniving ways, Alisya, the protagonist seems unaware of them:

Myra tried many ways to cause trouble for Alisya... Myra was meticulous in executing her plan for Myra's downfall. She knew Alisya was feeling the strain of marriage. She would grab the opportunity to usurp power. (111 [our trans.])

As expected, Myra fails in her plan to bring down Alisya. She becomes mentally unstable, stabs her friend, and is caught by police. This depiction of this bad, conniving woman conforms to another familiar stereotype: good women are rewarded; bad women are punished.

FEMALE BEAUTY

Beauty seems to be the yardstick of heroines. As mentioned earlier, the illustrations already show women of beauty, but the pages within the covers emphasise the extent of their magnificence. Zurin Adrina of *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota* exemplifies such beauty: 'Zurin Adrina was indeed fortunate to have been blessed with beauty. She became more beautiful as she grew to be a young woman. With her oval-shaped face, sharp nose, slightly brown hair, fair skin, almond-shaped eyes and blessed with long legs, she was the centre of attraction wherever she went' (5). The hero 'was besotted' (7) by her beauty. The same marker of beauty applies to Riana 'Riana's face was smooth and soft as white silk. Her gaze was luminous like the stars. Her smile struck at one's heart. Her lips were red like rose petals, sweet and moist as the morning dew enveloped the flower' (6).

The references to white silk, the stars, a rose as well as the morning dew are used to emphasise the natural beauty of the protagonist. Interestingly, in *Kirana*, the middle-aged heroine maintains her beauty with natural ingredients such as local vegetables (*ulam*), bee pollen and royal jelly. Even after having four children, she manages to look younger than her age. This fascination and obsession with female beauty can be traced to Malay classical literature. These women's beauty parallels the beauty of nature. For example, the loveliness of a woman's face is likened to a full moon, or the sweetness of her appearance is contrasted to the nectar of honey. These images of female beauty harmonise with the magnificence of nature. Hence, women who use artificial sources not drawn from Mother Nature are often depicted as having evil intentions.

Ironically, women in Malay chick lit, especially those in the category of bad women, embrace these ideals but resort to the unnatural assistance of cosmetic surgery to satisfy a patriarchal male's prescribed concept of beauty. Sophie, for example, reconstructs her face and other parts of the body to look beautiful. Myra

in *Aroma Hati* injects her face with Vitamin C and consumes all kinds of synthetic tablets to ensure her youthful looks. By making a stark contrast of the ways these women manage beauty, the authors of romance novels, of popular and high variety, clearly differentiate between the good and bad woman. Good women are equated with Mother Nature; bad women are associated with all things synthetic.

CONCLUSION

Much as we would like to dismiss popular novels because of the ways they present women, men and relationships, these writings present the limits and shifts in social discourse, in that they appear to be similar to the romance novels designated as 'high' culture. Both popular fiction and high culture romance novels offer insights into what can and cannot be fantasised about and publicly acknowledged. When a group of writers and readers share a common narrative interest, they are saying something significant about the Malay world.

The texts chosen here focus on a theme that expresses something significant about gender relations in the Malaysian context. Both the Malay popular novel and those deemed to be 'serious' can be just as traditional as older works in their portrayals of women's concerns, attitudes, ambitions and desires. Perhaps this is to be expected. They are, after all, produced by and within the same male-dominated culture. Nevertheless, these novels provide some new space for women's voices, communities, and experiences as sexual beings. They are not radical visions by any means, but they are a step beyond earlier 'women's texts', which have been more tightly bound by traditional ideas of what women should be and how women should behave. While romance novels suggest possibilities for women outside the role of the female companion, wife and mother, they tend to ultimately reaffirm traditional images of Malay women. Technically, women may be educated and successful in their chosen professions, but they must remain true to Malay feminine ideals. There is no room for transgression from adat practices.

NOTES

- ¹ S.E.A. Write (South East Asian Writers Awards) was established in 1979 to honour leading poets and writers in the 10 countries that make up the ASEAN region. The countries are Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. The aims of the award are: to recognise the creativity of writers from countries of the ASEAN region; to create a wider awareness and understanding of literary wealth amongst the ten ASEAN countries; to honour and promote the literary talents of the ASEAN creative writers; and to bring together the many talents of ASEAN writers. (<http://www.seawrite.com/English%20Site/Background-E.html>).

WORKS CITED

- Bisme S. 2010, 'Waves of Anxiety', Interview with Fauziah Ashari, *The Sun*, online, <http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=52320>, accessed 29th September 2010.

- Chicklit Club, <http://www.chicklitclub.com/aboutus.html>, accessed 15th March 2011.
- Cathoilda Sabin 2006, *Sekeping Gambar Sehelai Nota*, Tintaron Publications, Kuala Lumpur.
- Donadio, Rachel 2006, 'The Chick-Lit Pandemic', *The New York Times*, 19th March, online, http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/books/review/19donadio.html?pagewanted=2&_r=1 'chick-lit pandemic&sq=rachel donadio &st=cse&scp=1', accessed 26th March 2006.
- Ferris, Suzanne and Mallory Young 2006, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Routledge, New York.
- Fuziah Kartini, and Faridah Ibrahim 1998, Racun dan Penawar: Pertentangan citra wanita dalam filem-filem Melayu 50-an, Paper presented at Position, Images and Identity of Malay Women during the Colonial Era seminar, Institute of Malay Civilisation Studies, UKM, July.
- Hill, Amelia 2009, 'Chick Lit Offers Fully Rounded Heroines for Fully Rounded Women', *The Observer*, online <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/nov/01/chick-lit-heroines-weight-fiction>, accessed 15th March 2011.
- Khoo Gaik Cheng 2006, *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, UBC, Vancouver.
- Mohd Affandi Hassan 2006, 'Apa Itu Novel Popular?', *Utusan Malaysia*, 10th December, online, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2006&dt=1210&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Sastera&pg=sa_01.htm, accessed 29th September 2010.
- Rosnah Baharuddin 2003, *Wacana Wanita Melayu dan Sastera*, Penerbit UKM, Bangi.
- Roziah Omar & Azizah Hamzah 2003, *Women in Malaysia: Breaking Boundaries*, Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn Bhd, Kuala Lumpur.
- Ruzy Suliza Hashim 2003, *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives*, Penerbit UKM, Bangi.
- Sarimah Bardon 2007, *Kirana*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- Sarbini, Ismail 1990, 'Wanita Sulalatus-Salatin Menangis Sepanjang Zaman?', *Dewan Sastera*, July, pp. 44–48.
- Sharifah Zaleha Syed Hassan & Rashila Ramli (eds) 1998, *Kedudukan dan Citra Wanita dalam Sumber-sumber Tradisional Melayu*, Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu, UKM, Bangi.
- Siti Hawa Salleh 1992, 'Pengaruh Citra Wanita dalam Sastera Tradisional ke atas Sastera Moden', *Dewan Sastera*, March, pp. 8–15.
- Zahura Zakry 2007, *Aroma Hati*, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Kuala Lumpur.
- Zernike, Kate 2004, 'Oh, To Write a "Bridget Jones" for Men: A Guy Can Dream', *New York Times*, 22nd February, online, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9B02E0DE1E3DF931A15751C0A9629C8B63&scp=2&sq=kate%20zernike%20'oh%20to%20write%20a%20bridget%20jones%20for%20men&st=cse>, accessed 26th March 2006.
- Zurilawati Ku Zaifah 2007, *Pesona Kasih Riana*, Creative Enterprise Sdn. Bhd, Kuala Lumpur.

MD. SALLEH YAAPAR

The Empire Strikes Back: Re-Writing Malay History and Identity in Faisal Tehrani's Novel *1515*¹

INTRODUCTION

Published in 2003, *1515* by Faisal Tehrani is a unique text within contemporary Malay literature. Among recent novels in Malaysia it is one of the most difficult readings, but probably the most refreshing and rewarding one. Perhaps it is also one of the most multifaceted narratives, with elements of romance, adventure, history, legend, postcolonial discourse, postmodernism, socio-political criticism, feminism, and even fantasy. Consequently, the novel also lends itself to various ways of reading: from the perspective of postcolonial, postmodern, socio-political, and feminist theories, or a blending of all of them. Although the novel appears to be postmodern and unique, it in fact is connected not only to postmodernism and magic realism (as associated with Carlos Fuentes and Gabriel Garcia Marquez), but perhaps more importantly it draws on a long established tradition of Malay folk literature, specifically the folk romance known as *cerita penglipur lara* (tales of soother of cares).

1515: THE GENESIS

The novel *1515* has an interesting genesis. It is penned by Faisal Tehrani a prolific, innovative and highly imaginative author who belongs to a rather young and restless generation of Malay writers. The novel was written for a competition, namely the Hadiah Sastera Kumpulan Utusan (Utusan Group Literary Awards), and won the First Prize in 2002 for Kategori Novel Remaja (Adolescent Novel Category). When it was published in 2003 by Utusan Publishing and Distributors, Kuala Lumpur, it was tagged as Novel Remaja (Adolescent Novel). The adolescent or youthful image was enhanced by the cover design which depicts a charming girl in the pose of a woman warrior of yesteryear ready for war and adventure. However, a cursory reading of even the first chapter suggests that *1515* is a novel whose reach extends far beyond the adolescent category. After a complete reading it is clear that it is a work of a higher order. Written in a 'writerly' fashion, the novel presents an intricate and complicated story with a complex discourse that is not easily comprehensible to many adults, let alone adolescents.

1515 AND THE FATE OF MELAKA

Basically, the novel *1515* deals with the kingdom of Melaka (Malacca) and the Malay people of the past as well as of today. Established in 1400, Melaka was

a prosperous, powerful and well-known Malay sultanate, especially towards the end of the Fifteenth century.² Unfortunately, in 1511 the sultanate was defeated and was for a long time ruled by the Portuguese. Beginning from 1641 it was in turn seized and colonised by the Dutch. Then, starting from 1824 until Malaya gained its independence in 1957, it was ruled by yet another European power, the British.

The fall of Melaka in 1511, and its continuous subjugation by a succession of European powers, has been a painful and traumatic experience to the Malays as a people, haunting them even until today. Faisal Tehrani's novel is a reflection of this and more. It is a form of postcolonial discourse that aims to revisit the unpleasant history and to rewrite it from an alter-native perspective and in a form that is more desirable or palatable. The story and discourse involves especially two unique characters with a unique relationship, namely Nyemah Mulya of the past and Dr. Adi Fimiyyun Abdul Hadi of the present.

NYEMAH MULYA AND ADI FIMIYYUN

Nyemah Mulya is an incarnation of the past with a restless voice from beyond the grave. Adi Fimiyyun is her descendent with whom she communicates from time to time. In fact, he complements her, and is the voice of the present as well as the future.

In the prologue to *1515*, around the year 2002, and from beyond the grave, Nyemah Mulya, a 15 year old woman warrior of the Melaka sultanate, writes to historian Dr. Adi Fimiyyun of present day Malaysia. She invites him to collaborate with her in rewriting the history of Melaka. The restless soul feels frustrated that in history Melaka was defeated by the Portuguese, and that she herself was abducted and made a slave in Lisbon. Thus, together with Adi Fimiyyun, she would like to revisit the past and replace what is shameful with something pleasant.

According to Nyemah's narrative, the leaders of Melaka of her time were morally decadent. Thus, although in the Fifteenth century the sultanate was materially wealthy and powerful, it was only a matter of time before it would be wiped out by foreign intruders, namely the Portuguese who were already lurking around. Fortunately, Nyemah, was well versed in religion and equally adept in martial arts. She hailed from a religious family and studied in Mecca. She was saintly and even had dreams of ascension to the sky. In short, in the face of the impending calamity, though a female she was destined to be the saviour of Melaka.

Actually, Nyemah Mulya the warrior is not new to Adi Fimiyyun the historian, and the idea of an alternative history of Melaka does not come as a surprise to him either, as it has been on his mind too. In fact, around the year 1996 Adi Fimiyyun wrote a Ph.D. dissertation precisely on the warrior herself. In doing so he was supervised by Professor Nyemah Mulya whose husband, Muhammad Fernando Jose, is a descendent of the female warrior. The bright and well-known professor has taught at Princeton and at SOAS, University of London, and is the author of *Amnesia Sejarah* (Amnesia of History).

While Adi Fimiyun was researching in Portugal, the inspiring professor impressed on him her revised historical perspective on Melaka and its people. According to the professor, in 1511 Melaka fell to the Portuguese. Viceroy Alfonso de Albuquerque robbed the kingdom's treasures and abducted young Malay maidens, including the female warrior Nyemah Mulya, to be shipped to Lisbon. When his ship sank near Sumatra in 1512, he took all the trouble to save the girl, and in 1513 presented her to King Manuel of Portugal who made her a slave. Later, however, she was saved by a gentleman, Mario Rabal of Portuguese-Spanish parentage, who married her. Nyemah Mulya lived successfully in Ourem for more than 100 years. She even built a mosque in Nazare and converted the local people to Islam.

Based on the professor's narrative, Adi Fimiyun conducted an exhaustive research and wrote a brilliant dissertation which was later published as a book entitled *Jejak-jejak Nyemah Mulya di Portugal* (Footprints of Nyemah Mulya in Portugal). Impressed by the pioneering work and the high quality of his writing, the University of Lisbon conferred on Adi Fimiyun an Honoris Causa in November 2002. However, due to the well-known September 11, 2001 incidents in New York, the conferment gave rise to discontent among some Portuguese citizens. One may view this as a foreshadowing of the Islamophobia that is rapidly on the rise in Europe and North America now.

AMNESIA AND REMEMBRANCE

The idea of a revised history of Melaka in Faisal Tehrani's novel becomes more complicated but interesting when around the year 2003 Dr. Adi Fimiyun suffers from dissociative and selective amnesia. The illness is due to an incident that occurred during a boating trip. It makes him forget that the English lady, Aminah Maude Brown, is his wife, that he has a Ph.D., and that once he was in love with Frida Mohamad whom he used to fondly call Ida. He even forgets why he was interested in the year 1511. One day Maude, who is a part-time model, reminds him of Frida's art exhibition at the Petronas Twin Tower in Kuala Lumpur. He attends the exhibition, but while there he has a problem remembering things and people that he meets, including his former thesis advisor, Professor Nyemah Mulya. As for Maude, although forgotten and ignored by her husband during such situations, she still takes very good care of him, and even takes him back to London for medical treatment.

There is an element of irony in Adi's illness. While he suffers from dissociative and selective amnesia he is aware that the Malays suffer from amnesia of history. Also, there are times during his forgetfulness that he remembers or recovers certain matters that are of great significance. During his therapy sessions, for example, Nyemah Mulya the warrior emerges in his consciousness with her inspiring stories. Through him the woman narrates another version of Melaka's revised history. Actually, there is a fusion here between Nyemah Mulya's narration and Adi's own recovering and re-writing of history. The combined, revised version involves

the adventures of Albuquerque and Nyemah Mulya herself. It goes as follows: Viceroy Albuquerque invaded Melaka with the objective of controlling trade within the Malay Archipelago as well as destroying Islam therein and replacing it with Christianity. In order to defend the country against the Portuguese invaders, Nyemah Mulya the female warrior was made the commander of the Melakan forces. In the ensuing battle Albuquerque initially managed to gain control of the city mosque. However, Nyemah Mulya was able to kill him and drove away the Portuguese forces. Then, leading an armada of Bala Tentera Nusantara (Nusantara Military Forces), she headed towards Portugal for a pre-emptive strike on Lisbon. Along the way Nyemah Mulya liberated Goa in India from the Portuguese and married a rich Chinese-Muslim gentleman in Jeddah. Later on, in 1515, with the help of Turkey and Spain, she defeated Portugal. According to the narration, there are three versions regarding her strategy and method in attacking Lisbon. The first version involves the construction of a giant duck, *à la* the Trojan horse of *The Aeneid*, as a gift to the king. The second version involves the enlisting of divine help that came in the form of eagles which hurled fire-stones on enemy forces.³ The final version relates the construction of a giant tunnel from the seashore to the city. Thus, Malay forces ruled Portugal from 1515 up to 1580. After that Malay political power began to decline in Europe. However, traces of the Malay people may still be seen in Portugal even today, particularly in the coastal town of Ericeira 35 km northwest of Lisbon.

As the story continues to unfold Nyemah Mulya and her husband finally returned to Melaka in 1517. In Melaka she started a system of education based on Islamic principles. Unfortunately, she was falsely accused of being a witch or magician as well as a traitor to the Sultan. At the same time, her Chinese husband was accused of activities intended to undermine Malay sovereignty. As in the famous case of Hang Tuah in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (The Tale of Hang Tuah), the ruler, Sultan Ahmad Shah, was quick to listen to slander and acted rashly, ordering the military to raid the couple's house. In the event Nyemah Mulya was dragged to prison and later was produced in court with a swollen face.⁴ Without any proof, the kangaroo court hurriedly sentenced Nyemah Mulya and her husband to death by burning at the stake, very much like events during the Spanish Inquisition. Naturally, there were discontents and massive protests from within and outside of the country, the worst ever in the history of Melaka. However, protesters were rudely suppressed by government forces.

What is interesting at this stage of the story is the fact that although the couple was burnt at the stake in public, they did not die. This puzzled the authorities, including the Sultan. Finally, Nyemah Mulya informed the Sultan that in order to ensure their death he should kill them himself, and this must be done by using arrows and by reciting the sacred phrase 'Dengan nama Allah beta bunuh wali Allah' ('In the name of Allah, I kill Allah's friends). Finally arrows pierced the couple's bodies, but while Nyemah Mulya's husband died, the brave and saintly

woman remained alive. Instead, as with Remedios the Beauty in *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez, white light beamed from her body, and she miraculously ascended to the sky (306).

The foregoing narrative becomes the basis of Dr. Adi Fimiyun's next book, *1515*. The scholarly book was launched in September 2004, that is, a year after Faisal Tehrani's own novel *1515*, was published. Nyemah Mulya thanks Adi Fimiyun very much for his collaboration (actually for being her instrument) in writing the book, and in assigning her a place in the history of Melaka and the Malay people.

The foregoing line of narration suggests that amnesia could be positive as it breeds remembrance. In the case of Adi Fimiyun, it certainly gives rise to historical memory. It also becomes apparent that Adi Fimiyun is the alter ego of Nyemah Mulya. Both are actually two sides of the same coin. In fact, according to Nyemah Mulya, Adi is her descendent.

STRIKING BACK AND WRITING BACK

Faisal Tehrani's novel offers an interesting and intriguing postcolonial as well as postmodern discourse. It is indeed a discourse on Melaka as a former colony, that is, formerly a part of the European colonial empire in the East. Once a prosperous and powerful Malay sultanate, Melaka was colonised for a long time by a succession of European powers. This is an historical fact that is difficult for the Malay psyche to accept. Faisal Tehrani's novel is an attempt to revisit the past, and to write in literature an alter-native history — one that is more acceptable to the natives.

As already mentioned above, in Adi Fimiyun's *Jejak-jejak Nyemah Mulya di Portugal* it is said that Albuquerque succeeded in capturing Melaka. In the fateful event Nyemah Mulya was taken prisoner. Together with other Malay-Muslim maidens, she was shipped to Portugal and made a slave in Lisbon. But, she finally 'strikes back' by building a mosque in a town in the European country and converting the local people who were mostly Christian to her religion, Islam. She even left her descendents in the country. But whereas Adi Fimiyun's first book is rather mild, his second apocryphal version, *1515*, is more radical. The element of 'striking back' is crystal clear here. In this book it is said that Nyemah Mulya, the saintly woman warrior, physically defeated the invading Portuguese forces in 1511 and killed Albuquerque himself. She then militarily attacked Portugal and finally captured Lisbon in 1515. She returned to Melaka as a victor in 1517. Thanks to her victorious exploits, Malays ruled Portugal until 1580. This is the significance of the title of the present paper 'The Empire Strikes Back'. It refers to a former colony striking back militarily at its former colonial master, specifically in a revised, fictional version of history.⁵

However, the novel is not only about striking back militarily at the former colonial master as reflected in Adi Fimiyun's book, *1515*. It is also, and more so, a dialogue with the dominant Western power in general and with the Malay

past and present history in particular. It is about writing back, that is, engaging with and responding to colonial as well as established texts in a fictional manner. Through his novel *1515* Faisal Tehrani is re-inscribing the history and identity of the Malays as a people who founded the great Melaka sultanate but was later colonised and humiliated by Western powers. Faisal is a present-day young Malay-Muslim who was raised in present-day Melaka, one of the states within Malaysia.

Tehrani's novel portrays the Malays as a people with dignity. Their kingdom, Melaka, was a powerful trading nation in the Southeast Asian region, and although their political elites were corrupt, the people were steeped in religion and culture. When attacked by foreign invaders, they were not cowardly. By highlighting characters like Nyemah Mulya, Dr. Adi Fimiyun and Professor Nyemah Mulya, the novel makes a claim for the moral integrity and fighting spirit of the Malays today, and calls them to take command of their own lives by acquiring higher education and fostering a global outlook.

Faisal Tehrani employs a revisionist narrative in a way similar to that employed by the great Mexican author, Carlos Fuentes, in his novel *Terra Nostra* (1975). In *1515*, the history of the Malay people as recorded in its formal grand narrative is revised — rewritten from an alter-native, postcolonial perspective by the novelist. This is similar to the perspective taken by Fuentes in his rewrite of the Latin American formal grand narrative in *Terra Nostra*. In this postmodern master piece, Fuentes blurs time zones by making Felipe II of Spain marry Elizabeth Tudor of England and brings her to live with him at El Escorial near Madrid. He also intermingles Latin American writers of the 1960s Boom period with classical Spanish historical figures, thereby presenting a grandiose postmodernist revision of official history by providing an alter-native, apocryphal history of Spain and Latin America.

Actually, the 'striking-back' element or motif, that is, the military attack on the colonial master in Faisal Tehrani's novel *1515* is not completely new in Malay literary tradition. It has a precursor in earlier, oral postcolonial discourse. In fact, it is a distant, sophisticated echo of some Malay folk romances, the *cerita penglipur lara*, especially *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* (The Tale of Anggun Che Tunggal) and *Hikayat Malim Dewa* (The Tale of Malim Dewa). *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* was orally narrated by Pawang Ana in the early decades of the Twentieth century and edited by R.O. Winstedt with the assistance of Raja Haji Yahya. *Hikayat Malim Dewa* was also narrated by Pawang Ana and Raja Haji Yahya, and edited by R.O. Winstedt and A.J. Sturrock. The tales used to be popular among village folks both in Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula, were used as prescribed texts in secondary schools in Malaysia up to 1970s.

In *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal*, the Prince Anggun takes revenge against Raja Pertogal (King Portugal) and the lusty Raja Bedurai Puteh of Tambang Papan (King White Viceroy, read Albuquerque based in Goa) who has been terrorising

Malay kingdoms, namely Tiku Periaman (now Tiku and Periaman, two separate principalities in Sumatera), and abusing Malay princesses. Equipped with supernatural powers, the dashing prince strikes back by destroying their ships, invading their countries and marrying their princesses. In *Hikayat Malim Dewa* the Malay hero is Malim Dewa. Like Prince Anggun, Malim Dewa also boldly strikes back at the kingdom of Maharaja Pertukal (Emperor Portugal) killing thousands of people, including the emperor himself. As discussed earlier, in Faisal Tehrani's novel it is said that Nyemah Mulya defeated the invading Portuguese forces in 1511 and killed Albuquerque. She also attacked Portugal and finally captured Lisbon in 1515. Thus, in this respect although *1515* might appear at first to be quite novel, it is in fact part of a long tradition in Malay literature when the *cerita penglipur lara* is understood as part of a literary inheritance.

POSTMODERNISM AND MAGIC REALISM

However, unlike the accessible popular folk romances that preceded it, the novel *1515* is not written for a popular audience — it is not reader-friendly or 'readerly', but is written in a 'writerly' manner, favouring the author's delight in a rich, nuanced and thus elusive text over a more direct storytelling. Written by a young man who has written a Master's thesis as well as essays on postmodernist and postcolonial fictions and those of magic realism, the novel's theoretical and 'literary' influences are apparent. After reading twenty pages of the novel, readers of contemporary fiction would immediately recognise that *1515* has a postmodern tendency: the narrative is disjointed and fragmented; the plot anti-chronological and confusing; the point of view puzzling; the voices contradictory; and the meaning ambiguous. All this makes the novel a difficult and challenging, but rewarding reading.

1515 also has elements of magic realism. Like the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, particularly *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, it skilfully blends past and present, history and legends, facts and fiction, the natural and the supernatural. In fact, in *1515* Faisal even blends authentic and false footnotes. But although magic realism like that employed by Marquez and Fuentes might be recognised as the direct antecedent of *1515*, it is not in fact strange to Malay literature, being found in the most traditional Malay narratives, including the great works *Sulalat as-Salatin* (popularly translated as Malay Annals) and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*.

CONCLUSION

The discussion above shows how the author of *1515*, Faisal Tehrani, fictionally negates the dominant discourse — the conqueror's grand narrative of history — by re-writing Malay history and identity from the point of view of the traumatic colonial experiences of Melaka and the Malay people at large. Although postcolonial and postmodern influences on Faisal Tehrani's novel are easily accounted for, it is important to recognise that this kind of 'alter-native' perspective has a long history in the Malay literary tradition, if we understand that

tradition to embrace orature. It can be found specifically in folk romances of the adventure type such as *Hikayat Anggun Cik Tunggal* and *Hikayat Malim Dewa*. However, the focus in these tales is more on romantic love, with males occupying the centre stage, whereas the protagonist of *1515* is a lady, and a powerful one at that — a shift away from tradition that reveals the influence of modern feminism. Nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously, these texts may have been the seeds of which the novel *1515* is a mature fruit.

NOTES

- ¹ An earlier and shorter version of this essay was presented in Malay at Seminar Sastera Bandingan Antarabangsa, 7–9th June, 2007, Kuala Lumpur, and published in the proceedings edited by Ahmad Kamal Abdullah, Mohd Jusoh Majid and Muhammad Ikhrum Fadhly Hussin.
- ² A recent study (headed by Abdullah Ghazali of University of Malaya) claims that the Malay sultanate began in 1278, and not in the 1400s. See ‘Mallaca’, *Malay Mail*, April 17, 2010.
- ³ ‘However, Nyemah prayed to God and invoked eagles to come down from the sky and hurl fire-stones on the Portuguese army in and around Lisbon. As a result, the city was on fire for twenty-one days with thick smokes hovering around and could be seen from Montserrat’ (221).
This brings to mind the story of the *Ababil* birds and the defeat of Abrahah’s forces mentioned in al-Fil, 1–5, in the *Qur’an*. According to this passage, prior to the time of Muhammad, Abrahah, the Abyssinian military commander in Yemen, decided to force the Arabs to make their pilgrimage to his church in San’a, instead of the Kaaba in Mecca. To that end he invaded Mecca with an army of mighty elephants. However, before he was able to destroy the Kaaba, Abrahah and his army was attacked and defeated by the *Ababil* birds that hurled stones from the sky.
- ⁴ There is an indirect reference here to the political scenario in Malaysia. In the late 1990s there was a fall out between the then Deputy Prime Minister, Dato’ Seri Anwar Ibrahim, and the Prime Minister. Consequently Anwar’s house was stormed and he was taken into police custody. On September 29, 1998, he was produced in court with a swollen face and a black eye.
- ⁵ The phrase is inspired by the title of the 1980 science fiction film, *The Empire Strikes Back*, directed by Irvin Kershner, and by Salman Rushdie’s article ‘The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance’, *The Times* (London) July 3, 1982 and the title of the famous book on postcolonial theory and praxis, *The Empire Writes Back*, by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin.

Works Cited

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffith and Helen Tiffin, 1989, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Faisal Tehrani 2003, *1515*, Utusan Publications & Distributors, Sdn. Bhd. Kuala Lumpur.
- Fuentes, Carlos 2003, *Terra Nostra*, Dalkey Archive Press, London.

- Hikayat Anggun Che Tunggal* (Narrated by Pawang Ana) 1960, Malaya Publishing House, Singapura.
- Hikayat Malim Dewa* (Narrated by Pawang Ana and Raja Haji Yahaya) 1960, Malaya Publishing House, Singapura.
- Jelani Harun 2002, 'Peringgi dalam Kesusasteraan Melayu: Imej Luka yang Berkekalan', *Tradisi dan Moderniti: Kesusasteraan Melintas Zaman dan Wilayah*, ed. Lalita Sinha, Penerbit Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang.
- 'Malacca', *Malay Mail*, 17th April, p. 3.
- Marquez, Gabriel Garcia 1970, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Avon Books, New York.
- Md. Salleh Yaapar, 2007, 'The Empire Strikes Back: Fiksyen Kembara dan Pengungkapan Semula Sejarah dan Identiti Melayu dalam 1515', *Prosiding Seminar Kesusasteraan Bandingan Antarabangsa*, Ahmad Kamal Abdullah, Mohd Jusoh Majid and Muhammad Ikhrum Fadhly Hussin, ed. Persatuan Kesusasteraan Bandingan Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur.
- Rushdie, Salman 1982, 'The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance', *The Times* (London), July 3, p. 8.

RODNEY C. JUBILADO

On Cultural Fluidity: The Sama-Bajau of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas

In any given community, adaptation, assimilation, and reinvention contribute to cultural change which is always a gradual, complex, and continuous process. Such is the case of the Sama-Bajau, an indigenous group of Austronesians residing in the stretches of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas and beyond. The Sama-Bajau community is a diverse group of people connected by the sea and the myths, rituals and dances that they carry beyond their ancestral homeland. Even the concept of homeland among the Sama-Bajau defies the conventional wisdom derived from the Western practice of delimiting a group of people in terms of geography. For the Sama-Bajau, the point of reference is the sea, the sea current, and the other seas beyond the horizon. Yet although scholars have argued that these groups of people are basically one from an historical perspective, a growing consciousness of political and economic boundaries is giving rise to a sense of separateness among the groups themselves that belies the evidence of a shared culture. This essay presents some aspects of the cultural fabric that binds and unifies these diverse peoples. Similar celebrations of festivities, ceremonies, music, and other performative expressions of the Sama-Bajau culture are found on both sides of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, in particular, amongst those who are residing in the Sulu Archipelago, Philippines and in Sabah, Malaysia.

ASCRPTIONS, IMAGINED DIVISIONS, AND DISPERSIONS

Owing to the fact that the Austronesians are mostly marine and insular, it is not surprising that the sea is conceptually and essentially important in relation to the dwellers of the seas and the islands. Where some of these Austronesians dwell in the sea with islands dotting the expanse thereof, this preferred location through political, economic, and historical processes substantiates the classification of some of them as sea-dwellers. Such are the Sama-Bajau, a diverse Austronesian people occupying the common maritime national boundaries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Clifford Sather (1997) claimed that the majority of the Sama-Bajau are land-based in comparison to those who are sea-based. Their geographical location gives them the name either Sama Dilaut or Sama Darat which basically means sea-oriented Sama and land-oriented Sama, respectively. The sea is central to the former group which caused them to be called sea gypsies or sea nomads. It is the sea that unites them however dispersed and mobile they are.

Mark Donohue (1996) used the name Sama-Bajau to refer collectively to a group of maritime people called Sama or Bajau. Focusing on names, the Sama-Bajau call themselves Jomo Sama and other various names which can be based on the names of the islands and places they inhabit. This manner of self-ascription in terms of geographical location brings forth various names such as Sama Davao, Sama Zamboanga, Sama Sitangkai, Sama Siasi, Sama Simunul, Sama Tuaran, Sama Semporna, and Sama Sulawesi, among others, which indicates how widely these people are dispersed across the current political and international boundaries of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. This fact calls to the mind the question of these people's origins and areas of dispersion wherein current political boundaries were absent from the collective memory of the Sama-Bajau.

The Sama-Bajau in the Philippines always refer to the Sulu Archipelago as their place of origin. This is supported by the historical fact that these people inhabited the archipelago with the Tausugs and other indigenes even before the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century. The political dominance of the Tausugs and the status of servitude of the Sama-Bajau is a complex construction that benefits only the dominant party. This situation existed only when the Tausugs, who eventually became dominant in the Sulu region, embraced Islam and achieved a cohesive functional unit equivalent to a state. In fact, Sulu attained Islamic statehood and became part of Darul Islam in 1450 AD (Tan 129). By the time they became the majority in the Sulu Archipelago, the Sama-Bajau people, who were considered the least Islamised and were dispersed widely across the two sides of the seas, evolved as subjects in the newly-formed political state, the Sultanate of Sulu. But in the eyes of the colonists, these two indigenous groups were described pejoratively as pirates and marauders who were the menace of the seas affecting the European trade from Singapore in the south to Manila in the north. But the Sama-Bajau's own myth of origin is recorded by Harry Arlo Nimmo who writes:

Long ago the ancestors of the Sama Dilaut lived in Johore, a place to the West near Mecca, in houseboats much like those they live in today in Tawi-tawi. One day a strong wind began to blow. To secure his boat, the village headman stuck a pole into what he thought was the sea floor and tied his boat to it. The other villagers, also fearing the wind, tied their boats to that of the headman's. It turned out, however, that instead of going to the sea floor, the pole of the headman was stuck in the nose of a giant stingray that lay sleeping beneath the flotilla. That night as the Sama Dilaut slept, the ray awakened and began to swim, pulling the boats behind it. When the Sama Dilaut awakened the next morning, they were adrift on the open sea and did not know their way back to Johore. For one week, they drifted helplessly until finally the leader pleaded to Tuhan for help. Within minutes, Tuhan sent down a *saitan* [spirit] which entered the leader, who thus became the first *djinn* [shaman] among the Sama Dilaut. The *saitan* instructed the leader to sail for two days toward the East. The flotilla did as instructed and, on the second day, land was spotted. Upon reaching shore, the headman again stuck a pole [called *samboang* in Sinama] into the sea floor and all the boats were tied to it. This was the first mooring place in the Philippines for the Sama Dilaut and was consequently called 'Samboangan'. Today it is still called this by the Sama Dilaut while the rest of the world knows it as 'Zamboanga'. Shortly after their

arrival in Zamboanga, the Sama Dilaut became subjects of the powerful Sultan of Sulu. During the course of his many marriages throughout Sulu, the Sultan gave groups of Sama Dilaut a bride wealth; thus, the Sama Dilaut became scattered throughout the Sulu Archipelago. (22–23)

On the other hand, if linguistics is used to identify the place of origin of the Tausug people, the Tausug language shows that its close sister languages are those of the indigenes of Butuan in northeastern Mindanao and the Cebuanos of Visayas. This linguistic fact leaves the Sama-Bajau people as one of the original inhabitants of Sulu Archipelago. However, not all Sama-Bajau refer to the archipelago as their point of origin. The Sama-Bajau of Sabah, in particular the East Coast Bajau, have another traditional story to tell. Owen Rutter presents this traditional account of origin:

Of the Islamic people by far the most important are the Bajaus, or Sea-Gipsies, of whom there are about 31,000, and unlike the pagans they have definite traditions of their origin. It is said several hundred years ago a certain Sultan of Johore had a beautiful daughter, Dayang Ayesha, with whom both the rulers of Brunei and Sulu fell in love. Ayesha herself favoured the suit of the Sultan of Brunei, but as his rival was the better match she was packed off to Sulu with a strong escort of men and war-boats. Thereupon the Brunei prince, nothing if not a dashing lover, led out his own fleet and gave battle on the high seas; when the fight was at its fiercest he brought his own *prahu* alongside that of the princess, took her aboard and sailed away before any of the escort could stop him. The Johore people were aghast. Death stared them in the face whether they went on to Sulu or returned to Brunei. So cruising the seas, they picked up a living as best as they could, stealing their wives from unwary villages. Sometimes they settled on unfrequented islands, but mainly they lived as outcasts in their boats until gradually some of them formed scattered piratical communities along the coast of North Borneo. (73–74)

In parallel, another traditional account of similar theme is found in Herman Van Dewart:

The Bajau originally came from Johore. Once a Johore princess disappeared during a storm at sea. The Sultan of Johore organized a group of people to search for her. However, the lost princess could not be found, and the people who were looking for her found themselves far away from Johore, and were unable to find their way back again, and so they settle down along the coastal areas of Borneo, Sulawesi, and in the Sulu Archipelago. (446)

These accounts are self-explanatory and speak of the Sama-Bajau people who used to serve in the Johore Sultanate, and involve a princess who is either lost or abducted. It is clear that they refer to a close affinity with their fellow Austronesian sea-dwellers occupying the Johore-Riau area. Moreover, these accounts deal with the seas and the sultanates, with the former speaking of them becoming outcasts who developed economic means by making use of the sea, and the latter account telling of settlement in Borneo, Sulawesi and Sulu.

However juxtaposing these traditional accounts with historical facts, such traditional accounts would point to the existence of the Brunei and Johore

Sultanates both of which did not exist in the 13th century AD. The Brunei Sultanate was established only in the 14th century AD and that of Johore only in the 16th century AD. Therefore the Sama-Bajau migration could have only occurred 400 to 600 years ago. Shifting towards empirical evidence, Kemp Pallesen did a study on the migration of the Sama-Bajau and made use of a dispersion hypothesis wherein chronology is set in AD 800 (116, 153). This hypothesis claims that the current geographical site of origin is situated in Zamboanga, Mindanao and dispersed towards Basilan and Sulu and moved onwards to Borneo, Makassar, and Sulawesi. He posited that the arrival of the Sama-Bajau in Borneo was sometime in the 11th century AD which is 300 to 500 years earlier than the oral traditions of the Sama-Bajau.

Although the Tausugs considered that the Sama-Bajau are not so Muslim and that their Islamic faith is syncretised with the animistic tribal beliefs commonly practised before the arrival of Islam, it cannot be denied that the Sama-Bajau possess knowledge of the Islamic teachings including that of the Al Miraj which is also known as the Ascension Night of the Prophet Muhammad. One of the Sama-Bajau stories is recorded by Gerard Rixhon followed by a translation:

Maka Burrak na bintang mbal niya' dalowa na. Binatang langkaw min himar, sogoah siraka sab bagal. Bayhu' na bate saga bayhu' anak Apu' Adam. Maka' Baran na bate'; saga baran kura'. Hulas na manjadi pal-mata tipay. Mag-sinag sahaya na... Maka' mata na kaduwa-duwa, bate' mamahi durri. Bang papandang mata na, bate saga sinag ilaw. 'Mbal ra atud pandang. Taga gallang tallu nay' na. Dalam niya' maka gaos nipat ma iya, malaingkan dakayu' kayu Tuhan... (37)

There is no animal like Burak. The face is just like that of the descendants of Grandfather Adam. It is taller than the deer, but it has the body of the horse. There is nothing stronger in this world. Its sweat drops like mother of pearls. Its saddle ornamented with rubies... Its two eyes are like shining stars. And when you peek into them, they reflect the sun's brilliance. No one can stare at them. On three of its feet are bracelets but none on the right one. No one could describe it, save Allah... (37)

This story is the Sama version of the Ascension Night of the Prophet Muhammad wherein the Angel Gabriel invited Muhammad to a journey riding the supernatural animal described as half-human half-horse called Buraq. This story is celebrated by Muslim believers and the retelling is a whole evening event for the Sama-Bajau who chant it with accompanying instruments. The translation of the description of the Buraq is presented below as quoted from Rixhon:

In the Islamic orthodoxy, the description of the Buraq from Sahih al-Bukhari is that of 'a tall beast, larger than a donkey and smaller than a mule. In each stride it would place its hoof at a distance equal to the range of the vision...' For sure, various versions of the story of the Ascension Night abound in every corner of the Islamic world from Africa to Asia. It is in the process of acculturation that the versions are adapted where elements common in the natural setting of the adapting people are intertwined in the story in lieu of the non-translatable elements of the standard version. The same thing has happened in the version of Sama-Bajau

where the indigenous word *pal-mata tipay*, translated as ‘mother of pearl’ and of the pre-Islamic word *Tuhan* which is roughly translated as the Arabic ‘Allah’ are mentioned and accepted by the group as canonical. Aside from the communally accepted stories which are common among the dispersed Sama-Bajau, their performing arts and rituals are remarkably identical. Although the Sama-Banjau incorporated Islamic rituals like the reading of the Kur’an and the recitation of Arabic prayers, the practices of *pagkanduli* and *pag-umboh*, for example, retained their pre-Islamic animistic undertones (like the offering of fruits or the killing of a white chicken). Shared practices like these are bound by a common cosmological viewpoint even if some of the Sama-Bajau embraced the Islamic religion.

From the cosmological viewpoint of the Sama-Bajau, the most supreme being is called *Tuhan*¹ who is not only in heaven but also in the sea and everywhere. There is also *Umboh* who is the mediator between *Tuhan* and the Bajau. Some of the spirit beings are called *saitan*, described as capable of effecting good or evil and found in any place, or *djin*, a spirit which could cause evil, sickness, and other untoward incidents (Bottignolo 98). Included in the list are the spirits of the ancestors who are believed to be either benevolent or malevolent. Such characteristics play a role in the celebrations, festivities, and performance of rituals with the accompanying dance and music in the celebration such as *pagkanduli*².

MUSIC AND DANCE: UNITY AND DIVERSITY AMONG SAMA-BAJAU

Perhaps the very essence of the cosmological structure and its efficacy in the daily life of the Sama-Bajau can be represented by the celebration of *pag-umboh* and *pagkanduli*. The celebration of *pag-umboh* is related to the communal reverence towards the ancestors, the *umboh*, among Sama-Bajau. In this celebration the *umboh* is believed to return to the community of the living and such return is celebrated in a festive mood by preparing the newly harvested rice during the *habagat*, the southwest monsoon which occurs in August or September. This celebration is also called *magpaay-bahaw* due to the fact that it involves the preparation of the *paay bahaw* ‘new rice’. The word *paay* is a shortened form of the word *palay*, ‘rice’; due to the syncope of the middle lateral sound, compensatory lengthening occurs, which is a common phonological phenomenon in Philippine languages. Calling the festival *Umboh Pai-Baha-o*, Bottignolo (73) refers to the whole festival which he called ‘the grandest Badjao feast’. It is attested that this celebration is held on both sides of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas such as in Bangau-bangau, Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia and in Sitangkai, Tawi-tawi, and the Philippines. However, the Sama-Bajau of Banga-Bangau consider the *Umboh Pai-Baha-o* of Sitangkai as first among equals in the region (Hanafi 27).

In the celebration of *magpaay-bahaw*, the offerings include the newly harvested rice, coconuts, sugar cane, and corn, among others. The central element in this celebration is the *paay-bahaw*, the newly harvested rice, from which the name of the celebration is derived, and the preparation of which involves an elaborate procedure. Initially the de-husking of *paay-bahaw*, called *magtaparahu*, was



Figure 1. Paay-bahaw before the Magpaay-bahaw ritual began.

done with the recitation of *duaa* or Islamic prayers. This process was followed by *magpatanak* which is inclusive of the drying of the de-husked rice and the ‘sleeping’ of *paay-bahaw*. De-husking rice was done by female members of the community, in this case, the women of the host family. The house of this particular family became the locus of activity of the *magpatanak* which includes the ‘sleeping of rice’, which is the laying of rice overnight, in the middle of the living room. After a night or two of the ‘sleeping of rice’, the *paay-bahaw* was roused from its sleep and divided into three parts: two for *buwas kuning* ‘yellow rice’ and one for making *panyalam* ‘sweet rice meals’ and *durul* ‘sweet rice cakes’.

In making the *buwas kuning* from *paay-bahaw*, turmeric was added to produce the conspicuous yellow colour. As the rice meals were cooked, members of the host family entered the middle part of the living room — considered sacred due to its status as the sanctified locus — to invoke the *Umboh* to ask for permission in raising the *panji kaumbuhan* ‘ceremonial flag’ to mark the start of the rites of *pag-umboh*. After this flag-raising, all the *paay-bahaw* meals were then placed in a row at the locus alongside the chosen coconut and incense. This was done while the members of the host family performed the *mandi katurunan* ‘communal ritual bath’ on the house jetty. After the communal bath, the members of the family assembled near the locus to continue the rites of *pag-umboh* by pouring the newly produced coconut oil onto the piles of *buwas kuning*. The



Figure 2. Panyalam and Buas Kuning.

members of the host family then chanted prayers, called *zikir*, to the *Umboh*, led by the Muslim prayer leader. The recitation and chanting of prayers were accompanied by burning incense as part of the offering. In the invocation and recitation of prayers, a loud voice was essential especially in the calling of the names of ancestors. During the loud chorus of prayers, one could notice that the prayers were directed towards and focused to the offerings situated conspicuously in the locus. In concluding the *pag-umboh*, the prayer leader approached the locus and prayed with words corresponding to the supplication for permission to end the *pag-umboh* and to give thanks to *Umboh* according to the objective of the celebration and performance of the rites. After the performance of the *pag-umboh* rituals, everyone in the household including the guests were invited to partake of the *paay-bahaw* sweet offerings accompanied by playing the gongs and the *kulintangan* 'graduated gongs', called *magtagunggu*, and performing the dance called *mag-igal*. This celebratory performance of music and dance was accomplished using the traditional musical instruments and dance steps.

The preceding procedural description of *pag-umboh* is the common pattern seen in many types of *pag-umboh*. Some modifications and variations do exist in the performance of the rites of *pag-umboh* depending on their purpose such as during childbirth, healing or exorcism, among others, which carry the objective of contrition, apology, request for protection, and other pragmatic or religious

reasons that the individual or the community needed. The time element of the celebration of *pag-umboh* is also crucial — depending on some factors such as the availability of the materials for offering, good weather, and no funeral services going on in the community, otherwise, the celebration of *pag-umboh* must not go ahead for fear of incurring the wrath of the *Umboh*.

Another form of celebration which marks the Sama-Bajau cultural identity is that of the *pagkanduli*, a communitarian celebration involving communal dancing, playing, and music performance. The celebration of *pagkanduli* is performed or organized for inter- or intra- communal purposes — be it social or religious. The same can be said of the concept of *pagkanduli* among Sama-Bajau, which is considered as one of the most peculiar identity markers of the group. To highlight the importance of *pagkanduli* in everyday life among Sama-Bajaus, the celebration of *pagkanduli*, which is also common among the indigenous communities of Mindanao and Sulu, is even exploited by peace-keeping bodies in the reconciliation process among conflicting groups.³ *Pagkanduli* is celebrated by two groups of Sama-Bajau across the international boundary between Malaysia and the Philippines in particular those of Semporna, Sabah and those of Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi.⁴ The elements in the celebration of *pagkanduli* in the two groups are identical and are carried out in the same fashion. Both celebrations of *pagkanduli* include the elements of rituals, music and dance and the core participants.



Figure 3. Djin Lella holding the propitiary coconut.



Figure 4. Magpaay-bahaw ritual starts with the reading of the Quar'an.

In brief, the particular *pagkanduli* witnessed by the group of researchers headed by Dr. Hanafi Hussin of the Department of Southeast Asian Studies of the University of Malaya in 2008 started with the preparation of the journey from Sitangkai to Sikulan. When the party reached Sikulan, the participants performed the dances and gave the offerings to the spirits, called *bansa*, and placing these offerings under a tree which was believed to be inhabited by the principal spirit called Tuan Laut. After this part of the event, the procession proceeded to the abode of another spirit called Dayang Dayang Mangilai. After visiting this abode, the procession returned to the primary location and performed some traditional dances and games leading to the concluding rituals. Among the games they performed were *dundang* 'swing', *sipa* 'kick ball', *lakad-lakad* 'skip rope' and *hila* 'tug-of-war'. In the performance of the rituals, it was noted that the main participant is the *wali djin*, which roughly translates to a spirit medium, who performs the *igal-djin* 'dance of the djin' in a trance. Music is made by playing the traditional instruments such as the *pulau* 'flute', *gabbang* 'xylophone', *kulintang* 'set of graduated gongs' — an ensemble of gongs that are played for *tagunggu* which normally accompanies a dance characterised by the rhythmic movement of the body and hands. Each dancer must be invited to join the communal dancing to receive the blessings of the resident *bansa*. There were two primary dancers in the group, namely, *Djin Lella* 'male djin' and *Djin Denda* 'female djin' who

were designated as spirit bearers. Among the invited dancers, some had metallic finger extensions called *sulingkengkeng* making the movement of the hands more pronounced. This type of dance is associated with the resident *bansa* of the abode which the group visited. All the dances were performed and judged satisfactory by the *wali djin* and when such pronouncement was made, the *pagkanduli* was concluded by sprinkling tonics around the tree. The head researcher, Dr. Hanafi Hussin, suggests that the *pagkanduli* ritual 'reconstitutes the community in their processes of memory making through the passing of narratives, their shared experiences in communing with sacred as embodied in the dancing of the *djin* who co-dwells with the spirits, and their shared realization that ritual in a significant way informs their *pusaka* or heritage of identity that sets them apart from others' (personal communication 2010). It is also in the *pagkanduli* that the Sama-Bajau perform music and songs since these are integral to the accomplishment of the event. To this event, the Sama-Bajau bring their repertoire of vocals and chants for spiritual purposes.

In these two celebrations, the performance of music and dance is essential as it heightens the mood of the performers and participants alike. With the *pag-umboh* described as solemn, it was with *pagkanduli* that the jovial mode dominated and the atmosphere became more relaxed. It was with *pagkanduli* that wider participation of the community became apparent. There was much laughter, jostling, and



Figure 5. Djin Lella performing the ritual.

singing observed. Variations and modifications of the celebratory performances occur as the communal constraints dictate. For example, political references in the celebration and performance were noted when some of the members were seen raising the Malaysian flag in the background while their cousins in Tawi-Tawi could not even be bothered to buy a Philippine flag. International political symbols, whether brought to the scene or not, were just an addition to the imaginary and real political division among these indigenous groups. The economic strength of the Sama-Bajau community in Semporna was apparent in the celebration with their use of more sophisticated materials including fabrics, clothing, boats, boat engines, and even musical instruments that were superior to those employed by their cousins in Tawi-Tawi.

Moreover, in some communal gatherings such as *kanduli pagkawin* 'wedding gathering', the Semporna Sama-Bajau proved to be more technologically and economically advanced by hiring singers and other performers from the Philippines. Performers from Tawi-Tawi and Sulu were hired to sing and dance in the *pagkawin* but used non-traditional instruments. The use of an electronic keyboard and electronic guitars replaced the traditional gong ensemble where *kulintangan*, *gabbang*, and other traditional instruments had previously been used. One of the informants said that in recent times some of the musical performances had employed a computer or laptop with a loudspeaker since some of the traditional Sama-Bajau musical pieces had already been digitised. In fact a quick check on YouTube would testify to the fact that the Sama-Bajau music does not only cross international boundaries but also enters the virtual world. Some musical pieces include the famous love songs of *dalling dalling*, *duldang duldang*, *pakiring pakiring*, among others, which are collectively called *sangbayan*. Talib Lim Sangogot defined *sangbayan* as a 'song that inspires dancers to dance artfully' (72). These songs are gaining popularity in the virtual community through blogs and video-sharing websites like YouTube where these Sama-Bajau songs are attaining wide circulation and currency. Such popularity does not only ensure circulation and currency but also gives rise to discussions about cultural identity and language across national boundaries. Of these songs, perhaps the most widely discussed is that of *pakiring pakiring* which is also known as *Dayang Dayang*. The locals in Sabah commonly called this song *pakiring pakiring* due to the movement of the dancers who turn around as part of the dance. This particular movement is called *pakiring* in the local dialect. In Sulu, the name *Dayang Dayang* is used because it is the official title of the song in its recorded and commercialised form. The recording on YouTube which is labelled under the single title *sangbayan pakiring pakiring* has received fifty-nine comments in the three years up to 17th September 2010. The dual title *Pakiring/ Dayang Dayang* has received 165 comments in the three-year period up to August 2010 while the performance labelled only by the single title *Dayang Dayang* has eleven versions, with a total viewership of 2,249,994. Such numbers may indicate that this song is popular among people on both sides of the Sulu-Sulawesi Sea.

CONCLUSION

The Sama-Bajau are as dispersed as the islands of Southeast Asia yet even with this wide dispersion, there is still a bind which unites them: the seas. On both sides of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, these people are separated not only by the sea but also by the internationally recognised political boundaries of Malaysia and the Philippines. Yet the translocation of the Sama-Bajau does not prevent them from being identified as such, for the groups possess identity characteristics of a people irrespective of geographical location and economic strength. History has shown that these people travelled and migrated to various places of Southeast Asia and beyond, following sea routes for economic and social purposes. Culturally, these people perform the same rituals, chants, and other vocal practices for religious and social purposes although variations and modifications exist. Their histories, myths, rituals, music, dances, nominal ascriptions, and language point to the same people: they are the Sama-Bajau.

NOTES

- ¹ Some scholars including Rixhon proposed that the word *Tuhan* is from the Malay language. *Tuhan* is common among Austronesian languages in the region and for this reason the same word is used by the various indigenous communities in the Sulu region to refer to a different notion of a deity not identical with the Islamic or Christian god. However, for the Malays *Tuhan* is synonymous with Allah.
- ² Among regional Austronesian speakers, the Sama-Bajau word, *pagkanduli*, is morphologically derived from the word *kanduli* 'festive gathering' and is cognate to other diachronic reflexes such *kanduli/kanduri* of the Manobo, Maguindanao, Maranao, Tausugs and the Yakans and *kenduri* among Malays and other Malayic people.
- ³ In fact from a collaborative report funded by World Bank Post Conflict Fund, *pagkanduli* is one of the strategies employed for the community building and reconciliation among displaced indigenous population (Daguino and Kamlian). The same conflict resolution mechanism is employed in Sabah among the Sama-Bajau (Torres 30).
- ⁴ For the past couple of years, scholars from the University of Malaya and the University of the Philippines, in particular, Dr Hanafi Husin and Dr Matthew Santamaria, respectively, headed a research team conducting studies on the Sama-Bajau on both sides of Sulu Seas. The studies dealt with comparative ethnography, performing arts, and cosmology of the Sama-Bajau in Sabah, Malaysia and Sulu, Philippines. In their study on the cosmology and the associated performing rituals of the Sama-Bajau, various cultural semblances were taken into account.

WORKS CITED

- Bottignolo, Bruno 1995, *Celebrations with the Sun: An Overview of Religious Phenomena among the Badjaos*, Ateneo de Manila UP, Manila.
- Daguino, Dolly & Jamail Kamlian 2003, *Transition Interventions with Internally Displaced Persons: From Conflict toward Peace and Development in the Southern Philippines*, Community and Family Services International, Manila.

- Donohue, Mark 1996, 'Bajau: A Symmetrical Language', *Language*, 72.4, pp. 782–93.
- Hanafi Hussin 2008, *Magpahi-Bahau: Reunion between Living and Dead among Bajau Community of Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia*, Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, U of Malaya P, Kuala Lumpur.
- 2010, personal communication, 12th June.
- Hanafi Hussin & M Santamaria 2008, *Between Two Seas: Integrative Elements in the Pagkanduli Ritual of the Sama Dilaut (Bajau Laut) of Sitangkai*, Institute of Ocean and Earth Sciences, University of Malaya: Kuala Lumpur.
- Nimmo, Harry Arlo 1968, 'Reflections on Bajau History', *Philippine Studies*, 16.1, pp. 32–59.
- Pallesen, Kemp 1985, *Culture Contact and Language Convergence*, Linguistic Society of the Philippines Monograph Series, No. 24, Linguistic Society of the Philippines, Manila.
- Revel, Nicole 2008, *Literature of Voice*, U of Hawai'i P, Honolulu.
- Rixhon, Gerard 2005, 'A Journey into Sama Literature', *Literature of Voice: Epics in the Philippines*, ed. N. Revel, U of Hawai'i P, Honolulu.
- Rutter, Owen 1922, *British North Borneo: An Account of its History, Resources and Native Tribes*, Constable and Co Ltd, London.
- Sather, Clifford 1997, *The Bajau Laut: Adaptation, History, and Fate in a Maritime Fishing Society of South-Eastern Sabah*, OUP, New York.
- Talib Lim Sangogot 2005, 'The Tawi-Tawi Sama Voice', *Literature of Voice: Epics in the Philippines*, ed. N. Revel, U of Hawai'i P, Honolulu.
- Tan, Samuel 2010, *The Muslim South and Beyond*, U of the Philippines P, Quezon City.
- Torres, Wilfredo 2005, 'Voyages and Ethnicity across Reordered Frontiers: Conflict Resolution and Leadership in the Dynamics of Ethnic Identity Formation among the Sama Dilaut of Semporna', *The Work of the 2002/2003 API Fellows*, Asian Public Intellectuals Program, Tokyo.
- Van Dewall, Herman 1885, *Aanteekeningen Omtrent de Noordoostkust van Borneo*, Lange & Co., Batavia.

Cyril Wong

EXCERPT FROM *SATORI BLUES*

Stop swinging and the world swings
 like a gate into you; the trick
 is to move with the gate. Give the mind
 as an open road and watch it stagger to a halt.
 To not-act is also to act. Ripple to
 Calm; wave to bigger wave to calm again.
 Let the weather outside settle into
 The weather inside. Sun beats, wind
 Sits, leaves rest in a circle around us.

Forget to remember; remember to forget.
 Light carves my shadow into a rock,
 beckons and merges it with the shadow
 of a tree. A child's laugh calls down
 bridges into this world. That slow walk
 back to the car, our minds filled with
 inaudible music. Listening is its own silence.
 Rocks and shells have nothing to say.
 Why pay attention anyway?
 I think Shunryu Suzuki was trying to explain

that you are that which is sound.
 Inhale, exhale: success is only possible
 Whenever you fail. He closed his eyes
 To change but nodded asleep instead.
 Don't do it because you want to arrive,
 Then nothing can appear as love
 For the very first time. At the height
 of their meditation, their brains lit up
 in a way never before seen by scientists.
 The difference between self-hypnosis
 and meditation is the difference
 between escape and a settling into clarity.
 Wind chimes urged us into a sudden
 state of knowing. After saying the word
Buddha, the monk rinsed his mouth
 three times. An earthquake between

idea and reality. Belief, disbelief;
self, non-self; to cling or not to cling.
Look down and you have already fallen.
Look up and the sky is a bluer earth.

Look away and the way is everywhere.
Forgive the past for repeating for it knows
not what it does. No one truly vanishes,
which is the root of every crisis. Call it
a paradox; call it anything you like. What is it
about living that fills me with this gift
of fraud. Pain unconvincing. Neither does
relief. The difficulty of entering
the oasis of a familiar tree, the sky as *sky*.
We impose our straight lines upon nature

which is squiggly. Alan Watts describes
Euclid as possessing a weakened intellect
for his simplistic geometrical shapes.
String theorists themselves cannot agree
on which theory best describes
the universe. U.G. apologized for having
'no teaching here, just disjointed, disconnected
Sentences.' And emphasized, 'There is
nothing to understand.' If you must burn,
burn away every preconception and see

what happens. There is a place called alone
that we would rather die than visit.
Happiness is the poorest aim; we lose
when we think we have gained.
Mother was only interested in heaven;
nibbāna made no sense, no sense at all.
Why is birth so significant? Why is death?
Because, because, because. Edge thought out
so serenity spreads from cell to cell to cell.
Search for the mind and find only things;

search for things and find only mind.
I began to see myself from a distance,
a bundle of energies instead of feelings.
One enlightenment after another and another.
What have I said thus far? Webs
of images spun out of electrified air,
flickering and flickering out.

Everything, nothing; past and present;
design, no design; what do you cling to
to save your life? Deep breath now

(*Satori Blues: A Poem*, pp. 18–25.)

KIRPAL SINGH

Poetic Meditations: Two Singaporean Poets and a Personal Reflection

In spite of the fact that technology has moved phenomenally forward in these past few years, the long-haul flights—such as those from Singapore to the USA still do provide a lot of time for rumination and contemplation. On my most recent such flight that took place about three weeks ago I read, reread and reread two books of poetry that have just been released in Singapore. The reason why they have attracted my attention with such urgency is that they represent a small, but significant voice in the Singaporean poetic canon, a canon that has not usually been kind to what may be broadly termed the philosophical or reflective. So I thought it might be useful to share my reading of these books with a wider audience, especially such as *Kunapipi*'s readers who will be somewhat familiar with creative writings from my tiny island republic of Singapore.

Allow me to preface my presentation with the observation that Singapore has, especially in the last five years, made a huge international impact on many different fronts and levels: from having the world's first ever night F1 race to being a nation so highly judicious in its use of financial resources that even the great US of A has called upon the world to follow Singapore's example in the prudent handling of funds. At the material level of existence and living, therefore, Singapore is a prime example of a nation where discipline, hard work and efficiency have paid off — great dividends plus a high standard of living for all. It would be unwise of me not to boast of Singapore's attractiveness to foreigners from everywhere (and these include those from nations such as Sweden, Denmark, Australia, Germany, Italy, besides the usual China, India, UK, Canada, USA, Japan) that migration has become a burning issue on the country's political front.

In one of his numerous chiding speeches when Mr Lee Kuan Yew was the Prime Minister (he is now Minister Mentor while his son, Lee Hsien Loong is the nation's current PM) he raised the issue of the relevance, or, more correctly, non-relevance, of literature — especially poetry — to a nation bent upon finding its feet on the shifting grounds of economic strife. I remember that speech vividly — it was delivered at the old National Theatre Building to all of us who were entering university in 1969. Mr Lee cautioned against poets resting under coconut trees and waiting for inspiration. What he needed, he reminded us, were engineers, doctors, teachers and other professionals who would work hard to ensure Singapore's future as an island-nation, a nation-state having no natural resources save for its people. The warning did not escape all of us who were then already having some

stirrings of our poetic beings. But Mr Lee had a way of ensuring that all other voices were subsumed under the major voice of Singapore's material progress. Looking back I cannot say that he did wrong; certainly as a classmate of mine put it directly and bluntly: money can feed people, art cannot.

Today, more than three decades after that gruelling speech of the elder Lee, the platforms have changed: now there is a real call to have the arts flourish and for Singaporeans to awaken to the more subtle joys of cultural experience. Big funds are now made available for the annual Arts Festival and there has been plenty of excitement just in the past two weeks about the appointment of a Director of Singapore's Writers Festival, an event now high-pitched to be an important item in the nation's annual calendar of events. Indeed, we have come a long way.

Yet it is important to observe that while the creation of literary works never truly stopped, some of the nation's awkwardness concerning its poets and artists has continued to manifest itself in the absence of real engagements with the deeper issues of living in a context wherein poetry is not exactly given pride of place. Most poets here write a shrill note and the more impressive among them adhere to the usual modes of admonishment, lament, sarcasm and predictable truisms. This is not to deny that every now and then some poem does appear which transcends the normal tones and the normal sermons.

Pre-eminent among the absent voices is the voice of serious philosophic reflection and probing. When I read Chandran Nair's *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems, 1963–2009* and Cyril Wong's *Satori Blues: A Poem*, I felt the need to reread and re-reread immediately. Here were two books written by two Singaporean poets who could not be more different in age, orientation and background which contain almost wholly this meditative voice of serious philosophic reflection. Nair, the older poet, has not lived in Singapore for more than twenty-five years now, having made his home just outside of Paris. Wong, younger than Nair by some three decades lives in Singapore but in an oblique kind of way — preferring to stay in the shadows and making his stand/s usually when outside of Singapore — such as that when he decried Singapore's lack of sympathy/empathy for gays at the Ubud Writers Festival a few years ago.

A major worry for the pundits of Singaporean literature has been the close connection(s) between the poetry and the poets' biographies. Little wonder that most of the poetry published here fights shy of delving into the reality of the human condition — for how can one articulate the deeper meanings and truths of life and living if one is constrained for bringing into focus one's own experience(s)? This is what these two poets resist: in their poems lies their life — or at least significant aspects of their life.

Let me first take Nair's book. He dedicates this to his wife Ivy, for whom the majority of the poems seem to have been written.

thirty years

stand back

contemplate surrender
understand the subtlety
of forever receiving
time and love and pain

she not only surrendered
she also gave (144)

Those of us who know the Nairs-Chandran and Ivy, know the traumatic times they went through in trying to get together as a couple united in romantic love with a passion so consuming that we all worried for them. Now, years and years later, the call is to ‘stand back’ and look back — contemplate ‘time and love and pain’. Most Singaporeans will find this unsettling because we are not educated in this area of living, preferring always to pretend that everything’s honky-dory. Or, at best, that this is not the kind of experience/narrative that one ought to share with others. So how can the Singaporean mind fathom time and love and pain? Or, consider this:

his dreams curve along her body

hardening in print they violate
sanctuaries in which she placed
loveless days when words against eyes
lashed darkening images

once upon a timeless island, torture
heightened the beauty of suppliants
ravishing a tired old man blunted by impact

he remembers tiberius disputing caligula
who correctly guessed the time, subtly arranged
an adopted father’s desire for immortality

with equal gentleness he puts
a pillow to his dreams (129)

Caligula and Tiberius? Together in a poem where ‘his dreams curve along her body’? What is the meaning here? What nuanced communication/s do these lines/allusions contain? Most Singaporeans would not, today, have heard of Tiberius or even of Caligula and most will have great difficulty trying to understand the metaphoric underpinnings of this poem. Why? Because for the most part Singapore’s pragmatic, goal-targeted, grade-achievement educational system has left precarious little or no room whatsoever for the larger cultivation of sensibilities. While our young win Olympic gold medals in math olympiads most have never come across the classical names or been taught what a metaphor is, what it does and what power it can wield. Hence the difficulty of promoting poetry of this kind to the vast majority of Singaporeans whose basic goals are to earn enough to carve out a comfortable living in a city which is fast becoming one of the most expensive in the world.

I will take just one more short poem from Nair because it helps to illustrate what the younger poet, Wong, is not going to ruminate on:

rehearsal
 against love's gentle wind
 rehearsing the lines of her many parts
 he listens to her closing chords
 subtly transcribe
 his condition (151)

The majority of poems in Nair's *Reaching for Stones* are about love and its variations upon themes rehearsed and re-rehearsed. Nair is unrelenting in his honesty and spares no emotions when confronting hard realities. This has always been his forte — the capacity to absorb and make whole pain and suffering and then express this in poetry — there is such beauty and subtlety contained in the lines which result. Nearing 70, Nair has lived a life rich with meaningful lessons and it is good that he now shares his journey with his readers. His poetry will not, clearly, be appreciated by all but its value cannot be negated—Nair is one of Singapore's prized poets and ought to be recognised and regarded as such!

Cyril Wong, on the other hand, is a poet who has won national recognition and awards. Indeed, he received the coveted Young Artist Award years ago, when still only in his very early thirties. So when he publishes a book which is one long meditative poem, it is imperative that we as readers listen carefully and sensitively to try to understand what this gifted young writer is sharing. Unlike Nair who is healthily heterosexual, Wong is a self-confessed gay — a condition about which he has written much and of which he takes complete and total ownership; that is, he refuses to blame this on biology or some other mis-alignment, taking, rather, full responsibility for being gay by choice. This in itself is tough in any country, let alone one where for years homosexuality was a crime and where the specific law pertaining to this still remains in the books even though the Prime Minister has declared in Parliament that the law will not be used. If there are ironies here they have not escaped Wong whose lengthy poem reflects chiefly on the strange convolutions that Love brings.

The way is every place. Love appears
 as nothing when we begin to know it,
 nothing that is not its opposite, or
 whatever opposites mean, in this case —
 coming and ebbing, a kiss and heartache.
 The place where no love waits
 is also love... (5)

This is the opening of *Satori Blues*. Now I googled 'Satori' and this is what I found: satori refers, generally, to the sudden awakening of spiritual awareness usually associated with Zen Buddhism. So if we define 'blues' as being the music of pain, especially pain in and of love, we can approximately say that the title

of Wong's book can be paraphrased as 'spiritual awareness as suffering'. Wong mentions that his long poem owes much to the writings of such luminaries as Shunryu Suzuki, J and UG Krishnamurti, Alan Watts and Thich Nhat Hanh. As I read this powerful document of love-as-pain, love as no-pain, it dawned on me that the writer I had studied for my PhD — Aldous Huxley — must also be somewhere present in Wong's discourse. For both Huxley and Wong emphasise attention as a key mode for transformative spiritual awareness. How can 'the place where no love waits' be also love? Writing, almost speaking, in riddles and opposites, Wong teases us out of our complacencies and directs/guides our thinking along the long, hard route to self-awareness:

A votive without motives in a moment
without distinction. The revelation stayed
long after the high was gone, that there
is a way to observe each chiseled body
as something foreign or terrifyingly
new. I took part in the orgy, but instead
of being ploughed by lust, I wanted
all of you to abandon self-hatred
for joy. Sometimes love is unfulfilled
vanity: touch me, hold me, fuck me. (14)

'Ploughed by lust'; 'Sometimes love is unfulfilled vanity': can — does — the ordinary mind uneducated in the niceties of Zen take hold of the meanings embedded in lines like these (to be found almost on every page of Wong's book/poem)? I assume this would be a difficult question to answer by any one and I do not doubt that the poet himself may well also respond quizzically if grilled and drilled about the deeper understandings that lie beneath the many allusions and figures of speech. Is the poet also seeking to change us and make us less self-centred? It is not uncommon to note that most of his fellow citizens these days are seen to be focussed only on the self — a tiresome and worrisome preoccupation that is now starting to haunt the higher echelons of leadership in Singapore. Wong touches on what he senses as being the real challenge for most of us as we try to reach out for a larger frame of reference to make meanings of our discontinuous worlds:

the mystery can be solved if you would
lower the gun or magnifying glass.
The molester who was arrested had
asked victims to place their hands
on his chest to 'feel' his heart.
The hardest part is admitting that no wrong
has been committed. Thank you
for loving me in spite of yourself. (28)

How many of us thank those who love us for doing so in spite of themselves? For a young man, Wong writes profoundly. Perhaps personal crises and meditations upon one's contextualised existence does tend to make most humans wonder about

the quintessence of living. Perhaps. But there might well be a simpler, neater, cleaner and clearer answer to this:

What we talk about when we talk about loss
are the catastrophes: walls collapsing
and the terrible flood. What we forget is what
we fail to detect: the line opening like an eye
from one end of a dam to another;
a startled look and the averted vision
at a wrong word at yet another wrong time.
Loss is an ever-growing thing. The same
is true of how we win... (35)

Another nudge for attention: the wise men of old (they were mostly men) advised gently— let go, let go especially of that which we love. Find release. The Lord Buddha said, I come to show you sorrow and the ending of sorrow. The Lord Jesus said, be in the world but not of it. Wong's words, because he is also a talented singer and song-writer, ring in our ears a tune which we must of needs confront and come to terms with. His is a demand for engagement — not a side-stepping which the older poet, Nair, seems to be okay with, at least sometimes. So Wong's poem ends:

Listen to what I've said.
If the truth agitates, perfect! If not,
sing along — this number is for you. (39)

Hence 'blues'. Hence the extraordinary attempt to seduce the reader into somnambulance-via-rhythmic, rhymic language, the language of meditative poetry.

As far as I can tell Nair and Wong do not know one another: it would be interesting to have them meet and exchange notes about their understanding/s of human nature. Who knows: Singapore may yet be saved by its soothsayers — the poets.

WORKS CITED

- Nair, Chandran 2010, *Reaching for Stones: Collected Poems*, Ethos Books, Singapore.
- Wong, Cyril 2011, *Satori Blues: A Poem*, Softblow Press, Singapore.

Chandran Nair

AFTER THE HARD HOURS THIS RAIN

I

sipped like some rare wine
contentment has no edge,
only a spreading warmth, love.
glow gently, take your time.
you own this vineyard now, all yours.
cask contentment, let it mature
and never remember the bitter taste
in other wines gone sour

II

you've got love to age you,
gently let it draw the lines
soften the rough cutting edges,
the lust you once believed in
till your eyes see another face,
now also your own, peaceful.
in this vineyard let no wind
prophesy the dialectic of days
grown in poorer soils

III

walk the vineyard where love grows,
vines climb the trellis
into a sun no longer drying,
and the wind that once roared vengeance
falls gentle on skin, penitent.
walk your vineyard and be content
while the fences come down
one by one

(from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)*, p. 122)

GRANDFATHER

the seventy six years beneath his eyes
burst like rain, flood my earth with desolation.
his seventy-six years have compromised my eyes
into hardness that grows on me,
the imprint of his frown I wear
without his laughter

grandfather walks the bunds of seasons,
ploughing, sowing and harvesting years.
in drought stricken months
he wears old age as lightly as his beard,
his smile transcends

to be born from unlucky seeds,
a friend once wrote, is tragedy;
the curse flows unmuted, immutable —

only the hot stares of the gods persuade the proud

gods bothered him,
but temples missed his sacrifice.
he found truth, relief, away from divinity,
spacing out years in padi fields,
unfolding particular nuances, lack of attainment

like the padi stalk, once green, easily bent,
he grew with age, aged to ripened toughness
to resist anger, misfortunes of stricken years
with dignity, unpersuaded

(from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)* p. 34)

FOR LAURA

and the hair that you cut
which the wind will now miss
and the wine in your smile
which the rain will not wash,
what of them?
they are of the past, sleeping
when the risen day had fled.
for our waking and our sleeping
there is only the bright sun
drying our intentions and our hurts:
what of them, when each morning
we compose our sorrows into faces,
walking down the streets of our hells
not cared for, or by, alone waiting
as the wind and rain will wait
for your hair to grow again

(from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)*, p.78)

CENOTAPH

they have built a cenotaph
to remember that you died.
long ago, heads on bamboo poles
adorned bridges, we remember
but understand memories can't be thicker
than joint projects

we will come with abacus
to calculate among your bones
the veneration due you
in churches and mosques
you never prayed in, forgetting
that your bones are temples
you often walked in

(from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)*, p. 26.)

DRY WORDS

I have broken from the past,
history etched in ancestral blood,
bodies sword torn, shields hacked
to hands that have turned to writing
and dashed across my throat dry words

I have turned the world around
faced another burning sun
and been warmed by it; heat
may one day be a searing memory
that I too have loved, given unstintingly
and found the hurts deeper than fear
of a loved one's voice faltering
talking of some astrological doom
lurking between lean years.

I have lived between these words
found the days quietly slipping
into softness and anger into calmness,
because I love you, ivy

(from *reaching for stones: collected poems (1963–2009)*, p. 121)

ROBYN MORRIS

Relations of Difference: Asianness, Indigeneity and Whiteness in Simone Lazaroo's Fiction

Issues of representation have been central to critical discussions regarding a contemporary politics of difference. As Monika Kin Gagnon notes, 'at issue is visibility, visuality, and power, and what is often referred to as a politics of knowledge; it problematises who defines and who determines cultural value' (23). Simone Lazaroo's fiction brings to visibility issues of representation, especially the way race and gender are intertwined as artificial constructions of difference within Australian cultural and historical discourse. This article examines how Lazaroo's novels engage in a triangulated contemporary representational politics through an articulation of 'relations of difference' in which characters of Asian, Aboriginal and Anglo ancestry interact and react to racialised and gendered inscriptions of otherness. This essay therefore explores how Lazaroo criticises the hyper-visibility and sexualising of the Asian female body by the dominant white, Anglo-Australian society and the concomitant erasure of the Indigenous body and culture in stories of nation in *The World Waiting to Be Made* (1994), *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), and *The Travel Writer* (2006). These works signal Lazaroo's ongoing interrogation of the politics of both relations of difference and looking relations.

The World Waiting to be Made is set predominantly against a backdrop of Australianness that has not yet moved towards fully embracing official Multiculturalism. Australia is depicted instead, as a nation still intent upon protecting and perpetuating the supposed natural purity of whiteness associated with The White Australia Policy (WAP) which was one of the first legislations to be introduced by the new Australian Government of 1901. This Bill was not dismantled until the early 1970s and was predicated on preserving the purity of the imported 'white blood' in Australia and provided a nebulous scale for various citizens of the empire to distinguish between white and non-white, majority and minority, citizen and alien, right and wrong. It is the residue of this policy that adversely impacts upon the unnamed Eurasian narrator of *The World Waiting to be Made* after her family is move from Singapore to Australia in 1966. From the moment of arrival, her family is read as physically bi-racial. The narrator spends her teenage years searching for stability of place, rejecting her father and her darker-skinned twin sister, and donning various disguises in an

attempt to assimilate into whiteness. The narrator's skin becomes a movable and performative border as she mutilates and bleaches her skin to a socially suitable degree of whiteness. In the context of contemporary race politics, 'skin' is read as 'the outermost sheath, the "corporeal" dress of human beings' (Benthien viii). Claudia Benthien further argues that 'skin is understood less and less as a given. Instead it is seen increasingly as a dress — something that is worn, something a person carries around' (ix). The narrator's recollection of her angst-ridden years at school and at work in Australia describes an overwhelming desire to achieve 'normality' by erasing her 'strangeness', or what she describes repeatedly as her abnormal 'Asianness' (Lazaroo 1994 107). The narrator states that 'there were several darknesses about my appearance that I would have to alter if I wanted to obliterate my origins and be accepted [...] I would have to aim for as close to iridescence as depilatories and chemical warfare on my natural colouring would allow' (99). The narrator's ongoing act of whitening her of-colour body emphasises that perceptions of skin difference, particularly within the realm of Australian identity politics in the 1970s, had yet to move towards a degree of acceptance of skin difference.

The depiction of the narrator's painful journey to adulthood in suburban and outback Australia allows for a critique of the way the 'of-colour' is policed and categorised as deviant and other to the white body in the realm of the social and the political. Just as important, is the way this novel emphasises, through satire, how this same white body, at the very centre of racist discourse in Australia, refrains from marking itself. As Nicolas Mirzoeff so succinctly puts it, '[t]he perfect body in Western culture was sustained and made imaginable by the imperfect body of the racialised other' (2004 135). It is the exploration of the ongoing racism directed against the Eurasian narrator that lends the novel a degree of political edge. Whiteness is ratified in the official dialectics of governmental policies and Lazaroo analyses its appropriation and championing at the (unequal) level of Australian citizenship.

The World Waiting to be Made gestures towards Lazaroo's fictional engagement in subsequent work with triangulated discourses of subjectivity by also drawing into the narrative, not so much Indigenous characters, but issues surrounding Indigenous dispossession and containment in the Kimberley/Broome region of Western Australia. The narrator's teaching outpost is located on, what the Headmaster tells her on her first day, 'use to be no-man's land. Native Welfare pulled together a couple of desert tribes and tribes from the west to make it viable' (178). The history of the detrimental and inherently racist governmental policies such as the *Native Welfare Act 1954 WA*, which allowed for Chief Protectors (usually the police) to remove 'half-caste' or Aboriginal/Anglo-Australian children under the age of sixteen to reserves, settlements or institutions and the notion of the land as vacant and awaiting possession and taming is not explored in any great detail within this novel but Lazaroo is vitriolic in her depiction of the differences

between the manicured white colonialist homes, the school that is described as ‘an oasis’ (177) and the contrasting poverty of Aboriginal living conditions. From the school’s ‘patch of screaming green lawn’ (178) the narrator can see ‘the Aboriginal settlement, fenceless yards of earth around doorless houses, old iron bed frames subsiding under trees’ (178). At her first school meeting, the notion of keeping up an implied white standard of manicured and lush, green lawns within the harsh desert landscape is reiterated by the Headmaster: ‘[y]ou see the pride we have in our lawns and back in town [...] Which brings us to lawnmowers. Everybody should have their own. It’s like this: you don’t lend your wife out, you don’t lend your lawn-mower out’ (179). These carefully kept lawns become ‘each resident’s responsibility to upholding civilisation against the wild yonder’ (177). As the Headmaster, in his uniform of shorts and long socks, had earlier lectured to his new employees: ‘[f]rom experience. It’s like this: if you don’t keep up certain standards up here, you can quickly forget where you come from’ (178).

The Eurasian narrator is an ‘outsider within’ (Stephenson 2007 13) this small community and the return to questions of origins or where you are ‘from’, is not only a dominant theme in the novel but an important issue to address when analysing relations of difference. The girl is just as othered by the white community in this remote geographical location as she was during her teenage years in Perth.

I looked around the small group of teachers. Where *did* they come from? Two couples and two other singles, the men sitting back with their legs comfortable apart, the women crossing their ankles or knees. Each person neatly clipped, the women’s hair either permed, frosted or layered. There were women who had mastered the art of salad preparation, I knew; and men who knew how to set up a shed. We’d all been churned out of Perth’s suburban sprawl and two or three teacher training institutions, but in most other ways they were not from the same place as me.’ ([italics original] 178–79)

This critique of hierarchies of place or origins is furthered in the sense that Lazaroo aligns the girl’s sense of otherness to that of the Indigenous community. When a young Aboriginal boy is described by one of the teachers as ‘the missing evolutionary link’ (180), the narrator is once more reminded of her own outsider status: ‘I felt suddenly alone. That was the kind of joke meant to develop bonds between the teller and the listener. Why couldn’t I laugh? I’d felt marooned by that kind of joke somewhere before’ (180). This thematic of Asianness and Aboriginality as outsidership (to the implied dominant ‘insiderness’ of whiteness) and the question of a hierarchical basis of origins within this novel becomes an essential part of Lazaroo’s criticism of the triangulated and colour-based relationship between people of Asian, Indigenous or Anglo-Celtic ancestry. This is, perhaps, an under explored thematic within Lazaroo’s fiction but it is also an essential and critical entry into identity politics in an Australian context.

Lazaroo’s work is, arguably, more focussed on the confluence of gendered and racialised stereotypes, particularly the sexualisation of the Asian female body

by white maleness. In *The World Waiting to be Made*, the narrator's protracted sense of social displacement is exacerbated by her perceived inability to conform to prevailing cultural and gendered expectations. Throughout her teenage years she gradually removes the familial ties, she rejects her father's searing hot curries and she tells her school friends, 'He's not my real father, you know. I am adopted' (51). She wears tight jeans despite her father warning her that she would be 'unmarketable' well before she was married (82). Her bodily difference is now equated with an assessment of her sexual desirability and the narrator observes that when Max Swift, her first serious boyfriend, initially saw her, he 'passed his tongue once over his lips as he appraised me' (161).

Racially submissive and gendered stereotypes are continuously imposed upon the narrator. Her body is read as both sexually available and sexually exotic. While being outfitted for a costume for a multicultural parade in which she reluctantly takes part in Broome, she is asked by a pub patron 'can you do the things the strippers in Thailand do with bananas?' (194). This question replicates the depiction of Cynthia, a Filipino woman in Stephan Elliot's film *The Adventures of Priscilla: Queen of the Desert* being watched by both fascinated and repulsed male pub patrons as she attempts to shoot ping-pong balls across the crowded bar from her vagina. Both the question posed to the Eurasian narrator and the depiction of Cynthia, the stereotyped mail-order bride in *Priscilla*, is an Orientalist conjuring of the ghosts of Madame Butterfly and Suzie Wong in the extreme. This is a type of representation that Said has described in *Orientalism* as 'a widely influential model of the Oriental woman; she never of herself, she never represented her emotions, presence or history. *He* spoke for and represented her' (6). This form of racialised stereotyping transforms the narrator's body into 'a screen onto which they [people like the pub patron, her boyfriend Max, her school teachers and her neighbours], project their own fantasies of another exotic kind of life' (*WW* 200). The repetition of such scenes throughout the novel, and indeed in a popular film such as *Priscilla* works towards painting a picture of a racist and racially intolerant culture while also exemplifying the character annihilation that occurs from these repeated attacks.¹

When viewed as an ongoing stream of racism, these episodes suggest that there is no such thing as an authentic 'Asian' identity other than that imagined by the Anglo West. Stuart Hall argues that identity is not fixed:

[Identity] is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being.' It belongs to the future as much to the past. It is not something which already exists, transcending place, time, history and culture. Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. (112)

The narrator's search for a non-fractured identity involves a double form of exile. Labelled as 'a mix' (160), '*chap cheng*' or 'in-between' (40) she is rejected because

of her bi-cultural heritage in Singapore and yet, while in Australia, she struggles for recognition outside of a stereotype which 'fixes' her as a consumable, exotic blend of East and West. Jacqueline Lo notes that the term 'Eurasian' is a 'polite' reference to a culturally hybrid person while the terms 'mongrel', 'half-breed' and 'half-caste' are used in less polite circles (2002 298). More so, the act of '[p]athologising the Eurasian as depraved, [and as] inheriting the vices of both races, and the virtues of neither, resembles the construction of the Creole as the "tragic mulatto" in North America' (Lo 2002 299). The narrator's visible mixed race origin positions her as an object of sexual desire but also, as she experiences in her Kimberley teaching position, a racialised/demonised other.

Lazaroo's third novel, *The Travel Writer* (2006), explores how the West has viewed, consumed and constructed Asian female corporeality through the eyes of the white, male sojourner. *The Travel Writer* plays with the notion of writing as truth and the story gives voice not just to the published articles of the male travel writer, Walter Humphries, but also to the woman Ghislaine de Sequeira, who falls in love with him in Singapore, has his child and makes a living for herself and her daughter by writing obituaries. It is their daughter Isabelle, who writes her mother's life story. Suffering from unrequited love (and an early pregnancy), Ghislaine purposely seduces the tea-taster Rupert Balneaves, who visits her father's farm high in the hill tops of Malacca [to] where she has been banished to protect her from Humphries. In differing ways both Balneaves and Humphries ingest the exoticness that Ghislaine symbolises through the metaphor of consumption. While Rupert tastes the East, Walter observes and writes about it through the eyes of the white coloniser.

Littered throughout the novel are the many articles that Walter has had published about his interpretation and reaction to the 'Orient'. In particular, an article he entitles 'A World of Choice in Singapore' describes for his reader the exoticness of Asian dance halls and dance girls. Its strategic placement within the novel can also be read as a form of 'critical ironising' (Wah 113), a term coined by Fred Wah and a strategy employed by Lazaroo to criticise, through satire, historical textualisations of the Suzie Wong stereotype. Humphries notes that the dance halls in Singapore's Chinatown offer the expatriate bachelor 'drink, food, entertainment and especially women' (70). More telling is his added comment that these women, 'from white through to black and all shades in between — are *his* for the choosing' ([emphasis added] 70).

This suggests that Humphries' implied readership is white and male and these readers are further told that for just seventy cents the 'expatriate' can listen to the sounds of 'some Oriental chanteuse howling songs from the silver screen' (70). Humphries writes that this musical blending of East and West 'reinforces the sense that the World is yours for the taking as you eye the hostesses, also called taxi dancers, who sit on chairs on the circumference of the floor' (70). Having already drawn on Orientalist assumptions that accord the white, Western male

the power in this racialised/sexualised looking relation, Humphries reinforces his Orientalist perspective by describing the dancer's cheongsams as 'tantalising yet demure', worn 'tight enough to reveal their curves' and who wear 'just enough eyeliner and rouge to enhance their Oriental beauty' (70). They are, in Walter Humphrey's estimate, 'a pleasure to behold' (70).

The process of equating 'the Orient' with the exotic, with Asian, with cheongsam-clad females and with sexual voraciousness, is embedded and normalised within the cultural archives of Western art, literature, photography, film and also, in contemporary mass media.² Humphries' image of the female taxi dancers waiting to be 'chosen' by a white male provides Western audiences with a visual feast of a passive, to-be-acted-upon racialised, sexualised and gendered Asian otherness. Lazaroo's ongoing and developing body of work exposes the othering practices of white domination in Australia and beyond its white-washed shores, and is a principal part of an emerging corpus within the Australian literary scene. Lazaroo theorises the process of identity formation by linking it to the visual while simultaneously examining the pervasive colour-blindness of Australia's dominant political and social power structure.

It is this examination of the politics of the white male gaze, the Orientalised female body and also the obscuring of Australia's Indigenous culture and people that Lazaroo explores in her second novel, *The Australian Fiancé*. Lazaroo's use of the photographic metaphor in *The Australian Fiancé* allows for an examination of the way that otherness is fixed and coded through the visual.³ The novel signals that this coding is more often a misrecognition that requires contestation and criticism. The racialised look, as the novel progressively suggests, is an external imposition culturally inscribed by and through the colonising power of white vision, and the difference between seeing and being seen is based on inequitable power relations. As Jonathan Crary writes, 'vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product *and* the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions and procedures of subjectification' ([italics in original] 5). This notion of procedures of subjectification is raised by Lazaroo in an email interview when she states that:

I did work for a while as both a writer and photographer, although initially an amateurish one. Also I had memories of watching my father develop prints in his darkroom. I was looking at the different ways of seeing things with these two people. I hoped for the photography to function as a metaphor — one particular art-form. Also it provided both promise and limitations as a tool for seeing. The failure of both characters to capture an accurate image of one another, this provided a parallel to the failure of their photos to capture the things they wanted them to.⁴

The relationship between a Eurasian girl from Singapore and an Australian pearling master's white son in the Western Australian town of Broome in 1949 is battered by a divisive discourse of racialised othering that codes this relationship as unnatural and detrimental to the ideology of a civilised whiteness in which

Broome tries to blanket itself. Upon arrival in Australia the Eurasian girl is asked by an immigration officer if she can tell him what percentage of her is English blood. The very notion of who is considered 'right' or 'white' enough to enter Australia is explored in the course of the narrative through the character of a Eurasian girl, her Japanese/Eurasian daughter, the Indigenous workers and the pearling master's homestead called 'Elsewhere'. The Eurasian girl's mixed Singaporean/Malay/English ancestry, her past life as a Japanese war prostitute and her unacknowledged, part Japanese, part English/Singaporean daughter who is the result of this enforced prostitution, come under scrutiny and redefinition by the fiancé, his parents and the wider Broome community.

While Lazaroo is careful to accord the Eurasian girl a measure of autonomy, one troubling aspect of this novel is the narrator's orchestrated meeting with the wealthy Australian male on the docks in Singapore. It is this meeting that is in danger of pandering to a white gaze or audience rather than encouraging a reassessment of the politics of constructing otherness. The Eurasian girl is first described as looking at the wealthy Australian as he disembarks. She notices his monogrammed luggage, his expensive clothing and his air of confidence during the entire process. However, just as she looks at him, he is looking at her. When she is asked by the Australian if she would like to accompany him for a drink she also realises that while she was watching him, 'he had been watching her for some time from some place on the deck, amid the clamour and bustle of the ship's mooring' (19). Although there is a power in his gaze that hinges on colonialism and heterosexual desire, her gaze is one of longing to escape. As he walks to her along the dock that first time she believes that 'what she has hoped for so long may finally be coming true' (19). It is on the wealthy Australian that she pins her hopes of escaping the barely suppressed shame she has internalised during her enforced prostitution. This articulation of the girl's hopes of escape from her present rehearses a myth of the poor Asian girl who requires 'saving' from the excesses of herself and her culture by a gallant and liberal, 'white knight'.⁵ It is symbolic that when she and the fiancé initially meet on the dock, he walks towards her with his camera slung around his neck — a prosthetic eye that physically separates them but also a device that eventually enables him to construct an image of what he thinks she should be. Representation, as Monika Kin Gagnon suggests, has multiple meanings:

Aesthetic re-presentation is the process and products of making signs in various media such as art, literature, film, and video. It also refers to discourses or systems of knowledge, such as history, or education. Further, a politics of representation suggests an ideological dimension to images, texts, and discourses: representations do not simply 'communicate' or 'express' ideas, but rather are also 'constitutive,' in the sense that they contribute to the formation of subjectivities; they are ideological, in the way they privilege dominant values of a society. Representation can also be understood as political representation, making reference to how citizen' interests are acted upon by designated individuals. (23)

In linking how the girl is 'acted upon' by the Australian fiancé — that is, how her subjectivity is constructed by and through the prosthetic eye of the camera and both the organic/cultural eye/gaze of the wealthy white Australian fiancé, — Lazaroo highlights that it is through white visualising practices that the 'other's' identity is fixed as either a black or white image; one that cannot be negotiated accorded to hierarchies of racial dominance.

Lazaroo's work is politically motivated in the way it links the racialised gaze to that of gender. She calls attention to the fetishistic impulses of ownership and sexual possession underlying the white Australian fiancé's assertion when he first meets the unnamed Eurasian narrator. His statements, 'I like to look at you' and 'how he'd always hoped for a greater *intimacy* with Asia' ([italics original] 28) are doubly objectifying in their confluence of gender with exotic, sexual otherness. His statement reifies a Eurocentric image of 'the Orient' as a geographical site 'for wayward sons, superfluous populations of delinquents, poor people and other undesirables, so the Orient was a place where one could look for sexual experience unobtainable in Europe' (Said 190). Said's description of a pre-Romantic association of the Orient with 'sensuality, promise, terror, sublimity, idyllic pleasure, intense energy' (118) still has currency for the way it notes how the Orient is inherently feminised. As Gina Marchetti observes in her discussion of contemporary Hollywood's representation of sex and the 'yellow peril', 'in the Western imagination, the entire continent becomes an exotic, beckoning woman, who can satisfy the male Westerner's forbidden desires and ensnare him' (67).

This is a major point in assessing the representational politics of *The Australian Fiancé*. For while on the surface the fiancé tells the Eurasian girl he is in Singapore looking for pearl divers, Said's comment about wayward sons looking towards Asia as a site of sexual exploration may be applied to the fiancé's motives for visiting Singapore. When the Eurasian girl asks him about other women he has known, he tells her that 'the ones from the good families don't do it or they pretend they've never done it with anyone before. The barmaids and the others don't bother to pretend' (137). In this novel there is an ongoing linkage between Asia and Asian women as sites of sexual conquest and of 'good' white women as sexually inexperienced or virginal. It is important to the politics of this novel to remember also that the fiancé is in Singapore looking not just for pearl divers. This is at once his purpose and cover. What is implied is that he is also looking for exoticness. He desires an Orientalised lover — never a wife. Aki Uchida argues that during World War II and the Vietnam War, the Orientalisation of Asian women both disseminated and further entrenched the West's historically active racism against Asians (165). More particularly,

the casting of the local women in terms of whores and prostitutes [...] perceiving them as dolls [...] useful toys or something to play with [...] enhanced the feeling that Asians are other than human and therefore much easier to kill. The use of the Oriental woman also helps to place the white woman back home on a pedestal, as superior beings to Asian women. (166)

Although the novel is not didactically or overtly anti-racist, Lazaroo's representational politics remain generally critical of the continued historical correlation between Asian women, idealised femininity and a hyper-sexuality within Western culture. The narratorial focus on the way the Eurasian girl is objectified and framed by whiteness signals that an 'oppositional gaze' (hooks 205) is operating within the novel — one which indicates Lazaroo's more subtle engagement with the politics of race and racism.

One further point that is perhaps elided by the 'romance' between the Australian male and the Eurasian girl is the issue that the Australian visited Singapore both as a 'wayward' son of Empire but also as the dutiful son of a pearling master. He needs the skill and expertise of Japanese divers if his family's pearling business in Broome is to survive the post-war downturn. Stephenson writes that 'in the colonial and post federation periods Asian labourers were exempted from the 'White Australia' policy because the pearl-shelling industry could not survive without the exploitation of cheap Asian (and even cheaper Aboriginal) labour' (2007 7). Peta Stephenson acerbically notes that 'economic convenience did not, however, breed social acceptance.' (7) and in the post World War II period,

territorial anxieties were transferred to the control of bodies. The Asian pearlers' exemption from the dictates of the 'White Australia' policy did not protect them from strict cohabitation laws [...] Relationships between Asian men and Aboriginal women, in particular, were regularly characterised as wanton, wasteful, disruptive and indicative of resistance [...] any kind of intercourse, whether commercial or carnal, that operated outside the control of white hegemonic interests exhibited a kind of threatening fertility, one that broke down law and order because it transgressed the racialised categories that secured them. (2007 208)

In *The Australian Fiancé* Lazaroo links the erasure of Asianness in stories of nation to that of Indigeneity describing both as the 'doubly vanquished' (105). While it is permissible for the fiancé's father to have sexual relations with an Aboriginal woman, it is not permissible, in the mother's eyes, for her golden-haired son to have sexual relations with the Eurasian girl. This is where the phrase 'keeping up the standards' (read no racial mixing, no diluting of whiteness, no miscegenation) first articulated in *The World Waiting to be Made* is resurrected once more in *The Australian Fiancé*. The mother tells the Eurasian girl;

It is very easy for your standard to drop in a town like this [...] To go native. She shows me the magazines full of Margarets and Bettys trying to beat the dust and put the horizon in its place; blond Margarets and Bettys and brunette Margarets and Bettys; housewifely and temptress Margarets and Bettys. All the King's daughters, the daughters of Empire varnishing, always varnishing. Fingernails, floors, stoves, eyelids, everything about them so shiny they can see themselves in all the surfaces. (133)

At the parent's home an Aboriginal/Indonesian/Japanese housemaid describes the Eurasian girl as the 'boss boy's flank' (92). The housemaid's reaction, that she 'can't believe it' (92), and the unofficial labelling of the Eurasian girl as the fiancé's concubine within the wider township of Broome is a reflection of the

racist ideology prevalent in post-World War II Australia in which a 'half-breed', 'mixed blood' woman of Asian or Aboriginal descent was never meant to marry the boss or his son. The Eurasian girl acknowledges the racism underlying this ideology; 'I am the suspiciously alluring foreign body in which his blood might become mixed' (119).

The Eurasian girl is not the idealised white woman called Margaret or Betty. Instead, she is described by the fiancé's parents as a 'temptress' (183), 'prostitute' (181) and 'woman of little trust' (179). The girl's body is doubly colonised from without, firstly by the Japanese soldiers and then by the white Australian fiancé. However, this act of judging the girl as an untrustworthy temptress to whiteness, makes inconsequential not just the brutal act of enforced prostitution during the Japanese occupation of Singapore, but indeed the white Australian male's colonisation of the Eurasian girl's body. She is marked as a morally corrupt threat to the representational whiteness of the fiancé. Rejected by the fiancé, she is forced to return home when the Immigration Officer refuses to renew her Certificate of Exemption. The fiancé, to the relief of his parents, is now free from his brief but potentially dangerous liaison with the Eurasian girl. He remains in the protective boundaries of his nation and eventually marries a white, Anglo woman, just as his mother had envisaged. This is where the notion of relations of difference hinges on an ideological assumption in which the sanctioned relations are those between whites and intercultural relations between white/European, Asian or Indigenous communities are elided in stories of nation. In this sense, the Indigenous community becomes what Stephenson defines as the 'internalised other' and the Asian community, 'the externalised other' (2007 208).

The paralleling of Asian and Indigenous experiences as one of subjugation under white, colonial rule in Lazaroo's fiction while important, once more resists a rather crucial and critical distinction as articulated by Stephenson, and that is the very acknowledgement of an implication in Indigenous dispossession by peoples from the Asian diaspora within Australia. Stephenson writes that, 'the recognition that all migrants, past and present, are implicated in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Australians is also important in undermining the black/white binary of Australian historiography' (2003 68). While the father's Aboriginal mistress tells the Eurasian girl that she too knows 'how invisible this family makes you feel' (195), Lazaroo's implied criticism of the way both the Eurasian girl and the unnamed Aboriginal woman are named and defined as 'other' within the Broome community is somewhat undermined by her insistence in labelling the novel's main characters by their racial descent.

Names such as the 'Eurasian girl' or 'Australian fiancé' detract from the poetics of resistance otherwise offered by the narrative. While Lazaroo states that not using first names 'was an attempt to get under the skin'⁶ of her characters, it could be conversely argued that this is precisely what Lazaroo, unintentionally or not, has done. She has set up a racialised dichotomy and perpetuated a naming

process based precisely on skin difference. In naming the male protagonist as ‘the Australian’ or ‘the fiancé’, and being mindful of the novel’s post-World War II setting, Olivia Khoo argues that the Australian male is ‘identified either by his nationality (always positioned as white), or by his heterosexual desire and their romance’ (77). In contrast, the female protagonist is ‘symbolically infantilised and racialised (without nationality, without citizenship)’ (Khoo 77), through the constant description of her as the ‘young girl’, and the ‘Eurasian woman’. She is perceived as sexualised and racialised, an exotic hybrid. At their first meeting, and not long after she agrees to be his guide, the fiancé asks her, ‘What kind of Asian are you?’ When she states ‘I am Eurasian’, he responds with ‘Ah. Eurasian. East meets West. Like in the Noel Coward song’ (28). Coward’s ‘Half-Caste Woman’, is quoted later in the novel:

Where did your story begin?
Half-caste woman
Have you a secret heart
Waiting for Someone to win?
Were you born of some queer magic
In your shimmering gown?
Is there something strange and tragic
Deep, deep down? (141)

Coward’s words also conjure the ghost of Suzie Wong, defining the Asian woman as alluring but dangerous — an exotic Eastern woman with a past history and one who, similar to the Eurasian girl, requires saving from her prostitute past. It also suggests a sense of unease, conjuring another Western stereotype of the East — that of the inscrutable, secretive Asian woman who dilutes the purity of whiteness through her sexual allure. This is problematically borne out in the novel. During their first sexual encounter:

They approach one another’s bodies as if they’re approaching new countries, skins jumping at changes in climate, ears and eyes overwhelmed [...] she slides like a fugitive under the white starched sheets that crackle like paper. It’s as if the young woman’s afraid he will see something about her she wishes to keep concealed [...] She has heard all about foreigners falling for the Orient before. Here today, gone tomorrow. But it is not just her body she’s concealing as she huddles under the sheets. (49)

It is in such depictions of the Eurasian narrator that the representational politics of the novel move from an interrogative stance to perhaps an act of complicity with stereotypical and Orientalised constructions of a racialised and gendered otherness. *The Australian Fiancé* is problematic but only in the way that the novel’s exploration of an interracial liaison ends by sending the ‘threat’ the fiancé’s pure white lineage posed by the Eurasian girl back to Singapore. This is once more paralleled to the fiancé’s mother’s expulsion of her husband’s Aboriginal mistress from their home. The woman begs for food at the kitchen door but when the mother sees her she chases her off by training the garden hose on her. The Eurasian girl witnesses this watering down of the ‘other’ woman’s

threat to whiteness and is astounded when the mother excuses her actions by stating 'Just a spot of cleaning up I have to do every so often' (134).⁷

What begins to emerge in a study of Lazaroo's fiction is this notion of a white preoccupation with 'cleaning up' our backyards; a racial cleansing that has negatively impacted upon the Indigenous population since first contact and those arriving on Australian shores from the Asian diaspora. This process of 'cleansing' or rendering invisible is an inherent part of the white-washing of relations of difference within historical, cultural and social discourse. It is however, a relationship that seeps into the fabric of nation and rather than staining, it is as Lazaroo suggests within her fiction, a relationship that embellishes stories of nation, some of which are, as yet, still to be told. Lazaroo's work is important in discussions of Australian identity formation for its exploration of acculturated representations of both Asianness and Indigeneity.

NOTES

- ¹ Another example of the conflict and debate arising from reactions to the way white maleness is represented as morally superior to, and the saviour of, a sexualised Asian femaleness is Dennis O'Rourke's ficto-documentary, *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1992). In this film, O'Rourke, who is a white, middle-aged, Australian male records his encounter and eventual romance with a young female, Thai prostitute, Aoi. The film plays out, albeit problematically, the archetypal cross-cultural encounter evoked in *The World of Suzie Wong* and one that Lazaroo attempts to satirise in *The World Waiting to be Made*. This encounter, in Ien Ang's response to O'Rourke's film is 'overdetermined by the conflict-ridden divisions of male/female; rich/poor; white/coloured; first world/third world; Western/non-Western; dominant/subaltern' (1997 1). More telling to the polemics of unequal power relations at work and indeed reified in *The Good Woman of Bangkok*. The filmic audience only sees Aoi, much like the representation of Suzie Wong, and Cynthia in *Priscilla*, through the desiring eyes of the white, Western male.
- ² See Griselda Pollack, *Vision and Difference* (2003).
- ³ See Robyn Morris, 'Reading Photographically: Translating Whiteness through the Eye of the Empire'.
- ⁴ http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian_literature_reviews/77620, accessed 10 December, 2009.
- ⁵ For an extended discussion of the role of the 'white knight' in Hollywood films, see Gina Marchetti (1993) who examines the way filmic narratives reaffirm the difference of Asians to white Americans. Marchetti argues that following World War II the appearance of Asians in Hollywood films acted as a strategy of avoidance, one clearly linked to the guilt arising over the treatment of racial tension between African American, Hispanics, Native Americans and white Americans (6). Noting that the classic Hollywood realist film participated in the construction of hegemony and power and is inextricably linked to the discourses of race, sex, class, gender and ethnicity (7), Marchetti observes that films such as *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* and *The World of Suzie Wong* deal with a similar and fundamental crisis that involves the dominant white American culture attempting to reconcile a liberal humanist value system with an overall dominance of this system by the white, middle class male (218). This hierarchical subject position is codified in these films by 'saving' the white woman

from moral degeneration and preventing her sexual liaison with an Asian male, and also by 'rescuing' the non-white woman from the perils of her culture and assimilating her into the 'superior' American culture (218).

- ⁶ http://www.suite101.com/article.cfm/australian_literature_reviews/77620, accessed 10th December, 2005).
- ⁷ See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest* for a discussion on the role of the white woman in upholding standards of Empire.

WORKS CITED

- Ang, Ien 2001, *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*, Routledge, London.
- 1997, 'Foreword', *The Filmmaker and the Prostitute: Dennis O'Rourke's The Good Woman of Bangkok*, ed. Chris Berry, Annette Hamilton & Laleen Jayamanne, Power Publications, Sydney, pp. 1–3.
- Benthien, Claudia 2002, *Skin: On the Cultural Border Between Self and The World*, trans. Thomas Dunlap, Columbia UP, New York.
- Crary, Jonathan 1993, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*, MIT Press, Massachusetts.
- Dyer, Richard 1998, 'White', *Screen*, 29, pp. 44–64.
- 1997, *White*, Routledge, London.
- Elliott, Stephan 1994, (dir.) *The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert*, perf. Hugo Weaving, Terence Stamp, Guy Pearce, MGM. 1994.
- Gunew, Sneja 2004, *Haunted Nations: The Colonial Dimensions of Multiculturalisms*, Routledge, London.
- Hall Stuart 2003, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora', *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Padmini Mongia, Arnold, London, pp. 112–21.
- hooks, bell 1996, 'the oppositional gaze: black female spectators', *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies*, Routledge, New York, pp. 197–213.
- Kin Gagnon, Monika 2000, *Other Conundrums: Race, Culture and Canadian Art*, Arsenal Pulp Press, Vancouver.
- Khoo, Olivia 2001, 'Whiteness and *The Australian Fiancé*: Framing the Ornamental Text in Australia', *Hecate*, 27.2, pp. 68–85.
- Lazaroo, Simone 2006, *The Travel Writer*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.
- 2000, *The Australian Fiancé*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney.
- 1994, *The World Waiting to be Made*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle.
- Lo, Jacqueline 2002, 'Miscegenation's "dusky human consequences"', *Postcolonial Studies*, 5.3, pp. 297–307.
- McClintock, Anne 1995, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, Routledge, New York.

- Marchetti, Gina 1993, *Romance and the 'Yellow Peril': Race, Sex and Discursive Strategies in Hollywood Fiction*, U of California P, Los Angeles.
- Mirzoeff, Nicolas 2004, 'The Shadow and the Substance: Race, Photography and the Index', *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*, ed. Coco Fusco & Brian Wallis, Harry N. Abrams, New York, pp. 111–37.
- Morris, Robyn 2001, 'Reading Photographically: Translating Whiteness through the Eye of the Empire', *Hecate*, 27.2, pp. 86–96.
- O'Rourke, Dennis 1991, (dir. & prod.) *The Good Woman of Bangkok*, photography, Dennis O'Rourke, ed. Tim Litchfield.
- Pollack, Griselda 2003, *Vision and Difference*, Routledge, London.
- Said, Edward 1978, *Orientalism*, Penguin, London.
- Stephenson, Peta 2003, 'New Cultural Scripts: Exploring the Dialogue between Indigenous and "Asian" Australians', *Journal of Australian Studies*, 27.77, pp. 57–68.
- 2007, *The Outsiders Within: Telling Australia's Indigenous-Asian Story*, U of NSW P, Sydney.
- Uchida, Aki 1998, 'The Orientalisation of Asian Women in America,' *Women's Studies International Forum*, 21.2, pp. 161–74.
- Wah, Fred 2000, *Faking It: Poetics and Hybridity Critical Writing 1984–1999*, NeWest, Edmonton.

The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator

INTRODUCTION

This essay explores contemporary transnationalism through the creative texts written by Vietnamese-born 1.5 Generation authors residing in the USA, in order to define the generational impact on this emerging literature. I use post-colonial translation theory to examine how the process of migration produces a cultural and linguistic gap for these authors in relation to their readership, and to identify the creative strategies used by these authors in response to it.

The 1.5 Generation is a cultural construct that has become increasingly used within a variety of academic disciplines. This diasporic generation is comprised of those who have memories of their birth country, are conscious of being bicultural and are at least conversationally bilingual (Danico 6). They are technically part of the first generation, in that they were born overseas and are immigrants themselves. Earlier literature describes characteristics of this population without using the specific term, as the concept of the 1.5 Generation is relatively new; it has therefore yet to develop agreed-upon parameters (Bartley & Spoonley 67). Different theorists have applied the concept to those who migrated before the age of twelve, middle to late adolescence, or even to young adults; many theorists consider very young children who migrated before school age to be second generation (Park 141). Given the significance of linguistic and cultural knowledge involved in literary production, the term '1.5 Generation' in this essay refers to authors who experienced migration as children aged between six and sixteen years, including experiencing some of their formative socialisation, and therefore language acquisition, in the country of origin. Conversely, members of this Generation need to have arrived in the country of settlement at a young enough age to attend school and to experience non-work related socialisation.

In the first section of this essay, I propose that the Vietnamese diaspora is not only dispersed geographically but also linguistically; each generation internalises the dominant language to a different extent, and this results in a linguistic dispersal across generations in each country of settlement. I explore how a cultural and linguistic gap exists for diasporic writers. Strikingly, the cultural and linguistic gap experienced by first generation authors differs to that experienced by the 1.5 Generation. In subsequent sections, I examine texts by 1.5 Generation authors Lan Cao and Linh Dinh to identify the creative strategies they use to resist invisibility, stereotyping or linguistic colonisation, and propose that these strategies change

as the cultural and linguistic gap shifts over time and in diverse circumstances of cultural production. I suggest that 1.5 Generation authors do, indeed, have to redefine their positioning with each new creative work, to (re)translate themselves along a shifting continuum of otherness. The essay concludes by way of theorising the 1.5 Generation's relationship to language itself.

The Vietnamese diaspora is said to have emerged in 1975 after the Vietnam War,¹ in which the Communist North defeated the pro-western South Vietnamese government and unified Viet Nam after 1975. Vietnam's post-colonial status is contextualised by French colonialism, American neo-colonialism during modern times, and nearly a thousand years of Chinese domination in pre-modern times. As with other post-colonial nations, structures of inequity and oppression remain in place after Vietnam achieved independence from foreign powers. By the late 1970s and 1980s, over one million people fled South Viet Nam to settle in countries such as the USA, Australia, France and Canada. The result is a Vietnamese diaspora as social form which remains 'an identified group characterised by their relationship-despite-dispersal' (Vertovec 3).

The Vietnamese diaspora is not only dispersed geographically but also linguistically. After settlement, Vietnamese migrant communities increasingly adopt the dominant language of the host country. Generally, first generation migrants do not become as assimilated as their second generation children. The linguistic diaspora therefore occurs both geographically, as well as across the generations within each country of settlement. In between the first and second generation is the 1.5 Generation.

LINGUISTIC DISPERSAL

Post-colonial theory describes how the process of migration 'translates' the subject into object; first- and 1.5 Generation authors would have been members of the dominant culture if they had remained in Vietnam, but post migration and settlement they became members of a minority culture. Unlike the first generation, however, the 1.5 Generation authors do re-orientate themselves linguistically after migration to produce Anglophone creative texts. These texts are therefore consumed by a readership that is partially or primarily from a different culture. I suggest these authors are faced with a cultural and linguistic gap that requires their performance as 'translators' between the mainstream and minority cultures.

Post-colonial theorists are increasingly reappropriating and reassessing the term translation itself, and recognising the role that translation played during colonisation. 'Who translates whom becomes a crucial issue. Questions of cultural familiarity, the implied construction of the audience, the problems of constructing the "other" have particular relevance in this context' (Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 204). Unequal power relations between cultures was supported by centuries of translation as a one-way process for the benefit of the coloniser, rather than as part of a reciprocal process of exchange:

As a practice, translation begins as a matter of intercultural communication, but also always involves questions of power relations, and of forms of domination... No act of translation takes place in an entirely neutral space of absolute equality. Someone is translating something or someone. Someone or something is being translated, transformed from a subject to an object. (Young 140)

The creative writing produced by 1.5 Generation writers can be said to be directed toward a readership that is ‘partially or primarily of people from a different culture’ (Tymoczko 21). For this generation the gap is specifically between the mainstream culture in the country of settlement and the minority culture of the Vietnamese diaspora. Post-colonial translation theorist Maria Tymoczko compares the task required of translators with that required of post-colonial writers. Her assertion is that while translators transport a text, post-colonial writers must transpose a culture, which includes the various systems that enable the text to be grasped by readers:

As background to their literary works, they are transposing a culture — to be understood as a language, a cognitive system, a literature ... a material culture, a social system and legal framework, a history, and so forth. In the case of many former colonies, there may even be more than one culture or one language that stand behind a text. (20)

These are the elements that make up the cultural and linguistic gap, which members of the 1.5 Generation must attempt to overcome. Otherwise, their literary production may result in invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonisation. While the 1.5 Generation exhibits some characteristics of the first generation, the cultural and linguistic gap does, however, impact differently on the first generation as compared to the 1.5 Generation. I spend the remainder of this section examining this so as to apprehend the publication context that is the inheritance of the 1.5 Generation.

I propose that first generation diasporic authors face, simultaneously, a smaller and larger cultural-linguistic gap than the 1.5 Generation. The first generation face a smaller gap when writing in Vietnamese for the Vietnamese diaspora, because there is generally a shared cognitive system, history, literature and social system. Conversely, the first generation face a much wider gap when they write in English for a mainstream readership in the country of settlement, where a shared culture between author and audience does not yet exist. Researchers note that immediately after the end of the Vietnam War and until the early 1990s literary production written in Vietnamese by first generation authors, for a Vietnamese readership, was full of ‘wrath and anger’ (Qui-Phiet Tran qtd in Janette 271). In contrast, works written in English, for a mainstream North American readership, adopted a calmer tone, one that was ‘characterized by patience and tact’ (Janette 272). The boundary between insiders and outsiders is clearly demarcated for the first generation of writers.

For the first generation, the fact of displacement also imposes a barrier to writing creatively in the country of settlement, irrespective of the language used.

Writing about American eminent first generation author Võ Phiến, John Schafer explains that ‘trying to apply his descriptive powers, honed in Vietnam, to local scenes and culture in the United States [...] is not easy for him. In Vietnam he was the insider, reporting on the things he knew well... In the United States he is an outsider, trying to understand a strange land inhabited by a people whose language he barely speaks’ (Schafer 217). Creative writing relies on evocation and familiarity with not just the language, but also the environment and context. Even when Võ Phiến is impressed by his newly adopted land, it has no resonance for him; he experiences a sense of alienation from place:

In Vietnam, he says, ‘we had scenery but also feeling, the bright present but also memories of the past’. But in America, when we stand ‘in this field, on that hillside, or beside that river, we don’t yet have any memories at all. We have the scenery, but not the feeling’. (Võ Phiến qtd in Schafer 219–20)

Despite this challenge, Võ Phiến continued his creative output in the USA, writing for the emerging Vietnamese global diaspora. The essays he wrote during the early period of settlement were aimed at fellow refugees and take the form of letters to a ‘dear friend’. I suggest that Võ Phiến’s strategy of highly personalised and intimate writing is a response to the sense of dispersal and alienation from place. The effectiveness of this strategy is heightened by the fact that Võ Phiến writes in Vietnamese for first generation migrants, like himself, who are surrounded by the dominance of English.

Schafer is not of Vietnamese heritage but is able to read Vietnamese language texts. He describes his feelings as an ‘outsider’ reading Võ Phiến’s essays, written not long after he settled in America.

[W]hen someone like myself reads his works it is like eavesdropping on a private conversation... Reading [the essays] you feel as if you are perusing a bundle of old letters found in the attic. When you discover that the people talking in the letters are talking about you — about Americans — the strangeness of your situation increases, but, of course, so does your curiosity. (Schafer 14–15)

These ‘overheard stories’ confirm how wide the cultural and linguistic gap is for first generation Vietnamese writers when communicating to a mainstream American readership. The value of such works is that ‘they allow us to encounter the feelings and thoughts of a leading Vietnamese exile writer before they are edited to accommodate American sensitivities’ (Schafer 14–15). These early works by first generation writers are valuable documents in the face of North American hegemony; they provide a unique opportunity for readers in a powerful country like the USA to see themselves through genuinely new eyes, if and when these works are eventually translated into English.

In addition to the sense of displacement caused by migration, first generation writers found it almost impossible to gain a wider readership. Critic Nguyễn Hưng Quốc notes that works written in Vietnamese are not studied in Asian-American studies, which only focus on English language publications (263). Schafer suggests

that first generation writers are most often classified under 'Asian Studies' rather than Asian-American studies, and that only works written from an American-Asian perspective achieve recognition in mainstream North America (9). 'It's us to us only. There's no way to reach them [English-language readers]; every road is blocked, every door is shut' (Mai Thảo qtd in Schafer 8–9).

Anglophone works by first generation writers are not very well known. Having crossed the linguistic gap by writing and publishing in English, these first generation pioneers do not, on the whole, overcome the cultural gap. Michele Janette argues that in

practice, many who teach and research in this field have found obstacles to working with Vietnamese American literature, not least of which is the simple lack of knowledge about what is available. Since 1963, over 100 volumes of literature in English have been published by Vietnamese American authors, a figure that may surprise even scholars in the field. (267)

When the first generation did write and publish in English, it did not ensure that the mainstream readership took any notice. Janette suggests that 'obstacles to this literature becoming well know have had an ideological as well as practical edge, in that these narratives by Vietnamese Americans were not heard because they were not useful to either the American left or right in the years that followed the war in Viet Nam' (267). The cultural and linguistic gap makes post-colonial migrant writers invisible, especially those from the first generation. These works profoundly challenge North American assumptions about itself:

Vietnamese American literature muddies this picture. If what was lost in the war was innocent faith in the American right, it is embarrassing to face the insistent belief in the American Dream that is present in much of this literature. If American forces are the primary victims, it is awkward to listen to the accusations of betrayal from South Vietnamese soldiers. And if the war was really all about America, then accounts that center on Vietnamese experience are phenomenological impossibilities. (Janette 278)

It was this context of publishing and reading that the 1.5 Generation inherited. Post-colonial migrant literature is transformed over time, starting with exilic, to migrant, to diasporic literature, with affiliations 'renegotiated by every generation' (Trouilloud 21). The salient transformation between the generations in the diaspora is that the majority of 1.5 Generation writers cannot write in Vietnamese at a level required to create literary works.² For this cohort of writers, the proposal to resist the dominant culture by writing in Vietnamese is not even an option. By creating works in English, the 1.5 Generation have the opportunity for exposure to a world audience, while also being exposed to the dangers of translating themselves. The risk is captured in the aphorism 'tradutore, traditore — translator, traitor' (Young 141).

But who is being betrayed, and by whom? I propose that as the demarcation between insider and outsider is often blurred for the 1.5 Generation, these authors may feel as though they are betraying themselves in their performance as cultural

translators. In the next section, I examine some of the strategies that 1.5 Generation authors use to resist invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonisation, while maximising opportunities for creative invention that arise from their positioning as translators.

STRATEGIES AGAINST INVISIBILITY

Given that the 1.5 Generation is usually more fluent in English than the 'mother-tongue', they would seem to be furnished with opportunities that are denied first generation writers. But having crossed the linguistic gap, these authors must ensure that they are able to cross the gap of invisibility to reach a mainstream readership composed 'partially or primarily of people from a different culture' (Tymoczko 21).

In Lan Cao's novel, *The Monkey Bridge*, published in 1997, the young 1.5 Generation narrator experiences the culture shock of arriving in the USA just months before the fall of Saigon. The teenaged Mai indicates her positioning within the novel: 'My mother had already begun to see me as someone volatile and unreliable, an outsider with inside information' (41). However, as a member of the 1.5 Generation, Mai is able to switch from the mother-tongue to embrace the English language with relative effortlessness:

This was my realization: we have only to let one thing go — the language we think in, or the composition of our dream, the grass roots clinging underneath its rocks — and all at once everything goes... Suddenly, out of that difficult space between here and there, English revealed itself to me with the ease of thread unspooled. (36–37)

The ease of acquiring a new tongue is contrasted with the difficulty of reversing Mai's cultural positioning. The cultural switch is depicted as being extremely difficult and fraught. In order to create and maintain a new American identity, the 1.5 Generation narrator has to 'adopt a different posture, to reach deep enough into the folds of the earth to relocate one's roots and bend one's body in a new direction' (39). She makes use of elements found in nature that do not ordinarily change: the trunk of a tree, the pull of gravity, the flowing of a river. Then she applies verbs such as 'realign', 'shifting', 'motion', and 'moved' to highlight the impossibility of such a task. 'The process, which was as surprising as a river reversing course and flowing upstream, was easier said than done' (39). And yet, *The Monkey Bridge* is proof that the task of bridging the cultural and linguistic gap is possible for the 1.5 Generation, with the qualification that it is somewhat easier to switch to 'thinking in another language' than it is to entirely 'feel' in another culture.

The tension of intimately knowing a language while being distanced culturally from its corresponding mainstream society is what marks the 1.5 Generation as unique, compared with the first or second generations. In *The Monkey Bridge*, Mai repeatedly encounters the dilemma of being the cultural translator. In the following passage, she is living with her American host family. She is given some newspaper

articles by her 'Aunt' Mary, who is encouraging her to learn English. The articles contain early representations of the newly arrived Vietnamese community in America. They include stories of Vietnamese high-achievers, the model minorities who pose no danger to America's cultural hegemony: 'a Vietnamese boy smiled contemplatively as he was inducted into the school's National Honor Society' (87). Then, the narrator sees another article in the newspaper:

It began unspectacularly, with standard descriptions of homeowners and shopkeepers. Then, following the introductory paragraph, in clear inexorable print, neutral as the news itself, was a story about how a Vietnamese family had been suspected of eating an old neighbor's dog. The orphan pup had been the old man's only companion. What was I supposed to say to this? It wasn't Aunt Mary's fault. My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither. (87–88)

Mai is trapped by the cultural and linguistic gap, and is unable to identify completely with either perspective. For the 1.5 Generation, reality can be perceived as two entirely different versions of the same event, both of which can be 'as neutral as the news itself'. It just depends on whose 'news' they are reading.

The dilemma of double-identity, is inherent in the structure of the novel itself: the story jumps between Mai's narration (first person point-of-view) and Mai's mother, Thanh (first person point-of-view filtered through Thanh's diary). These two narratives are delineated by the use of two different fonts. Mai's narration takes place in the present, while Thanh's narration is historical in its retelling of the events prior to the family's departure from Vietnam. The main purpose of Thanh's diary excerpts is to provide Mai with answers to Thanh's actions in the present, and to ultimately reveal the terrible secret about Mai's grandfather, Baba Quan. The fact that this secret is kept from Mai for most of the novel marks her as an unreliable narrator with incomplete information about her half of the story. It also suggests that in Thanh's eyes, Mai is positioned as the translator/traitor, someone who is simultaneously an insider-outsider.

Throughout the novel, Thanh is correlated with Vietnam and the past, both in plotting and description: '[s]he was bent over the sink, her S-shaped spine twisted like a crooked coastline. I felt a spate of feelings — guilt, pity, love — crowd inside my chest' (205). Later, when Mai watches the final days of the Fall of Saigon from the physical safety of North America, the paralleling of Vietnam and Thanh is further emphasised. 'It was on TV, a luminous color origami cut from the dark of night, that I witnessed my own untranslatable world unfold to Americans half a globe away... It was as if all of America were holding its breath, waiting for a diseased body, ravaged and fatigued, and now all too demanding, to let go. Death must be nudged, hurried, if only it could be' (98).

The 'monkey bridge' in the novel's title represents, at different points, the interstitial space between Vietnam and America, life and death, and childhood and adulthood. While Mai's 'monkey bridge' is clearly positioned between the two cultures; her grandfather Baba Quan's 'monkey bridge' is the power of a man

to save U.S. soldiers from land mines because of his intimate knowledge of the ancestral land (112). When Thanh as an adolescent girl sees her future husband for the first time while he is crossing a 'monkey bridge', it becomes a metonym for the interstitial space between childhood and adulthood.

By the end of the novel, Mai's mother performs two irretrievable acts; she reveals to Mai the terrible secret about Baba Quan, and she commits suicide. These acts free Mai to pursue a materially and intellectually brighter future — although at great emotional and spiritual costs. As Trouilloud points out: 'unlike early Vietnamese American novels which were most concerned with keeping the past alive alongside the present to prevent the traditional lifestyle from disappearing, *Monkey Bridge* states the act of unearthing a past to break free from its chains' (209). Cao seems to suggest that one cannot stay in the interstitial space of the 'monkey bridge' forever.

As groundbreaking and accomplished as this novel is, it does raise the question of who is translating whom and for what purpose. Mai's narration is contemporary to the time-period depicted in the novel, and is thus given greater importance by the mainstream reader. The dual narration allows readers to hear the first generation's voice, but ultimately privileges the voice of the more assimilated 1.5 Generation. *The Monkey Bridge* has to resist invisibility, and draws on the method of 'over-telling' culturally-specific information, in order for the dominant culture readership to comprehend the significance of minority-culture practices or objects in the scene. It is a strategy which is perhaps understandable when the cultural gap is great.

There are instances in *The Monkey Bridge* where the strategy of 'over-explaining' sits comfortably within the work and adds to its impact. It works particularly well when the reader is able to identify with Mai's exasperation at the cultural distance between her and another character in the novel, and does not feel distanced or 'interrupted' by the 'over-telling'. In this passage, Mai is at an interview for entry into an American College, and has been asked by the interviewer where she lived in Vietnam: 'I'd concocted a habit of silence where Vietnam was concerned' (127). The cultural gap silences the migrant, renders her invisible. Yet despite this, Mai feels an urge to reveal 'something that would make the country crack open so she could see the tender, vital, and, most important, mundane parts (127–28). It is what is mundane and ordinary that becomes obscured amongst the media-translated images of the Vietnam War. Mai recalls childhood games, the texture of walls and sidewalks, the feeling after it rained, 'over-explaining' her memories. 'I wanted to tell her: It was not all about rocket fires and body bags... The Vietnam delivered to America had truly passed beyond reclamation. It was no longer mine to explain' (128). At the college interview Mai finds that she is unable to communicate across the cultural gap, yet the novel successfully conveys this to its readers.

However, the novel does contain a small number of instances of ‘over-telling’ that does not sit comfortably in the work. It occurs where the narrator is directly communicating with the reader rather than with another character. Reading this novel nearly fifteen years after its publication, one can sense some imbalance of power in this novel’s act of transposing a culture. *The Monkey Bridge* inevitably contains explanations of Vietnamese cultural practice which are now widely known by many readers in cosmopolitan Western cities. In this case, ‘over-telling’ has the effect of privileging the mainstream readership over the ‘insider’ minority community in a way that disrupts the narrative and distances the narrator from the reader. Mai describes the Mekong Grocery, delighting in all the items that can be purchased there, such as silk fabric, tropical fruit and even apothecary jars. As the list continues, the description becomes longer because the items are so unfamiliar to the mainstream American readership that the narrator has to resort to outright exposition: ‘even the vats of nuoc mam, salted fish compressed for four months to a year into a pungent, fermented liquid used as a dipping sauce mixed with lime, minced garlic, hot peppers, and a dash of sugar’ (64–65).

The narrator lists every single ingredient in nuoc mam, she tells us what fish sauce is, how it is made and how it is consumed. She has to do this because the target readership is not primarily the Vietnamese diasporic community, who already know this information and possess memories of this quintessential Vietnamese sauce. The novel has to work hard to overcome the invisibility caused by the cultural and linguistic gap at the time of publication. Consequently, a debt is owed to pioneer works such as *The Monkey Bridge* that have contributed to the narrowing of this gap between mainstream- and minority-culture readers.

STRATEGIES AGAINST STEREOTYPING

In many ways, 1.5 Generation authors must negotiate the use of existing stereotypes in order to cross the cultural and linguistic gap. Writers wishing to resist invisibility by writing Vietnamese-American characters risk being categorised as an ‘ethnic writer’. Invisibility and stereotyping can be different sides of the same coin.

A strategy that 1.5 Generation memoirists use to resist ethnic stereotyping is to emphasise the constantly shifting ‘I’ in their works. A second strategy of resistance is to write a collection of stories that emphasise differences in world perception from a diverse range of narrators. I suggest that 1.5 Generation author Linh Dinh uses a combination of both of these strategies in his collection of short stories, *Fake House*, to resist stereotyping as well as to highlight that ‘[c]ultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation ... they are subject to the continuous “play” of history, culture and power’ (Hall 255).

Fake House was written after Linh Dinh returned to Vietnam to live for two and a half years. The collection is divided into two parts — the first half of the collection is set in the USA, while the second is set in Vietnam. Alienation and

the abject are explored through ‘the unchosen’, such as Viet Kieus (‘overseas’ Vietnamese), gays, dwarves, ugly girls and other socially outcast characters. Dinh deploys a multi-racial heterogeneous cast to resist being categorised as an ‘ethnic writer’. Pelaud contends that *Fake House* is a rejection of the expected refugee narrative ‘that emphasize[s] development and progress’ (45) and is a ‘transgression of essentialist assumptions’ (45).

Even when Dinh creates characters vastly different to himself, the emphasis is still on the characters’ shifting positionality, rather than on their culturally fixed identities. His characters’ status change simply through the presence of other characters. In Dinh’s short story ‘Fritz Glatman’, the eponymous character considers marrying an Asian mail order bride:

Before this *idée fixe*, if you will, took hold, I was never partial to Asian women. Never even thought about them. But with mental exertion came a gradual, grudging appreciation. Stare at anything long enough, I suppose, and beauty will rise to the surface. The girls in *Origami Geishas* are mostly plain, their faces plain, their hair plain. Some are outright ugly. But my future wife must be unequivocally beautiful, though not too beautiful. Son of an immigrant, I was taught to be modest, to shy away from luxuries, and to shun all ostentatious displays. Indeed, even with a six-figure salary, I drive an old-model Ford. (20)

Stuart Hall proposes that diasporic communities exist in a continuum of otherness: ‘[w]e do not stand in the same relation of “otherness” to the metropolitan centre. Each has negotiated its economic, political and cultural dependency differently’ (228).

Dinh explores this through his main character, who essentialises other cultures, and believes in his higher place in the racial/cultural hierarchy, yet is (comically) shown to be shifting in relation to the metropolitan centre. ‘Fritz Glatman’ is a character sketch — its purpose is not to develop a plot but to let the character demonstrate his ever-changing positioning. The story reveals the power imbalances between newly arrived migrants, and those whose family had arrived a generation earlier. Fritz Glatman is relatively more central (or less peripheral) than the oriental bride he will eventually select. Glatman’s white male identity is, to borrow from Stuart Hall, ‘not an essence but a *positioning*’ (226).

In another work from the same collection ‘The Ugliest Girl’, Dinh distils the notion of a constantly shifting positioning to reveal society’s ever-changing perceptions of what is acceptable and what is not. In this story, the first person narrator is a very ugly girl:

At a party, should there be another ugly girl in the room — perhaps someone only half as ugly as I am — it would be me who would be embarrassed. I would be embarrassed for her because as soon as she sees me, I become her mirror. By being there, I expose her, interfere with her attempt to pass. My presence would ground her. Without me there is a possibility that she could forget, for a moment, who she is. Surrounded by beautiful people, she might even lapse into the illusion that she is one of them, that she belongs to them and not to her own ugliness. But with me in the room, this possibility is eliminated. Suddenly there is a subgroup, a minority of two, a sorority of ugliness.

(31–32).

The plain girl is reclassified as ugly the moment the narrator, an even uglier girl, turns up. Dinh's story disrupts the notion of binary essentialism (ugly/beautiful, white/black, tall/short) and suggests that what is designated as 'other' is not fixed. 'The Ugliest Girl' ends with the narrator finding true love, or extreme lust, with another marginal figure, the midget who walks into the bar.

For the 1.5 Generation writer, multiple first-person points-of-view is used not to convince readers of the essentialised identities (ethnic or otherwise) of a diverse range of characters, for to do so would be a self-defeating project.

The stories [in *Fake House*] suggest that who does the speaking and from which location alter the meaning conveyed by seemingly similar experiences, and demonstrate the human aberrations caused by transnational capital. (Pelaud 39)

Linh Dinh's stories resist stereotyping by emphasising and foregrounding his characters as identities that are constantly shifting in their interplay of otherness (and power) in relation to one another.

STRATEGIES AGAINST LINGUISTIC COLONISATION

Access to the dominant language provides many 1.5 Generation authors such as Lan Cao, Linh Dinh and Andrew Lam with opportunities to reach a wider audience, and yet their writing demonstrates a desire to remain culturally distinct. It appears that the 1.5 Generation author, like other post-colonial writers before them, seeks to 'convey in a language that is not one's own the spirit that is one's own' (Rao qtd in Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 38). However, it would be incorrect to suggest that the 1.5 Generation simply write from a first generation perspective except in English. Indeed, the defining feature of this cohort is a striking cultural and linguistic transformation; writers such as Dinh and Cao blur the boundary between insiders and outsiders that the first generation had previously found to be all too clearly demarcated. Therefore, the 'spirit' that the 1.5 Generation wish to convey in their literary output is often that of being 'in between' culturally and linguistically. From this cultural positioning, the 1.5 Generation has two broad approaches available to it: realism and impressionism. While the former seeks to re-create 'objective reality', the latter seeks to evoke subjective and sensorial impressions.

Under the first approach, realism, 1.5 Generation writers establish their cultural distinctiveness through the content of their work, and do so using standard English. These works rail against the invisibility caused by the cultural and linguistic gap by providing a diasporic Vietnamese perspective on historical events. Their use of standard language confers legitimacy in an arena where history is contested, and encourages a mainstream readership to identify with an otherwise minority viewpoint, as though it were as 'neutral as the news itself' (Cao 88).

While the strategy of realism may assist 1.5 Generation authors to overcome invisibility, it brings with it the burden of linguistic colonisation — whether felt to be great or small, or not at all, by the authors themselves. The question of which language to write in has previously been explored by post-colonial African

writers. Frantz Fanon reasons in *Black Skin White Masks* that s/he who has taken up the language of the coloniser has accepted the world of the coloniser and therefore the standards of the coloniser. Following on, Ngugi wa Thiong'o put forward the argument for decolonising the mind, which

culminated in his decision to write in Gikuyu or Ki-Swahili rather than English [as opposed to standard English] in order to address an audience other than foreigners and the foreign-educated new elite... The strength of Ngugi's position is that it is as concerned with the sociological implications of the use of English [as opposed to English] in terms of the control of production, distribution, and readership.

(Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin 130).

Under the second approach, impressionism — an approach that emphasises the sensorial and subjective aspects of reality rather than claiming 'objectivity' — 1.5 Generation authors can use an in-between language to convey their in-between-ness, one that makes the (cultural) translator visible. While this is a riskier strategy, as it may alienate mainstream readers, I propose that it is in the poetics of translation that authors of the 1.5 Generation most convincingly explore the ontological dilemma of double-identity. By applying the strategy of impressionism these texts can communicate an 'in between' view of the world from within. Such an approach brings with it wider implications:

[I]n translation studies a distinction is always made between whether to take an audience to a text, or to take a text to an audience... By defamiliarizing the language, post-colonial writers can bring readers face to face with the reality of difference, and call into question the supremacy of the standard language. (Bassnett & Trivedi 14)

Dinh's story, 'Elvis Phong is Dead', is set on the day US troops withdrew from what was then Saigon. It coincides with the suicide of a fictional Vietnamese pop singer (modelled on the actual Elvis Phuong, an 'overseas-Vietnamese' singer — who is himself modelled on Elvis Presley). Readers follow the zeitgeist of a rock 'n' roll era, which coincides with the passing of South Vietnam, a state that was backed by the USA during the war:

I remember April 30, 1975, very well. I was sitting in my office at *Viet Rock*!, overlooking Nguyen Hue Boulevard... I felt fatalistic that day, and wanted to be *implied* in history, a vain and pompous notion. In any case, I had my radio turned on to the American station, in an early bid for nostalgia perhaps. Someone was singing 'I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas'. Sick, absolutely sick!, the American sense of humour. (Dinh 2004 51)

In this story, the 'in-joke' is between the author and reader, but not necessarily the narrator, who does not even know the name of the singer, Bing Crosby. In addition, the phrase 'in an early bid for nostalgia perhaps' is perhaps a 'wink' at a knowing readership positioned in an American future. Dinh peppers the story with well-known signifiers of the Fall of Saigon: the radio announcer's reference to the temperature followed by the Bing Crosby song was a signal for Americans to evacuate immediately. Where Cao's depiction in *The Monkey Bridge* of the

same historical event is limited to that particular moment (99), Dinh's 'Elvis Phong is Dead' self-consciously locates the author and readers thirty years after the event, while its hapless narrator is stuck in 1975.

Elvis Phong is a well known Vietnamese pop star, who was not an Elvis impersonator, but a duplicate, a copy of Elvis Presley. In post-colonial terms, the Vietnamese pop world was appropriating American pop culture without the need to reference its context. The narrator goes on to 'explain' Elvis Phong to the reader:

For the sake of foreigners and the ignorant, I will have to state the obvious: Elvis Phong is the greatest figure in the history of Vietnamese rock and roll. He created a revolution in Vietnam. Even his clothes were original. He often wore open shirts to show off his smooth, hairless chest, and rhinestone studded, fringed jackets even in 100-degree heat. An entire generation imitated Elvis Phong. He defined his generation. Elvis was Vietnam. (52)

Again the 'in-joke' is between the author and the reader (at the expense of the narrator). There is nothing original or culturally 'essential' about Elvis Phong and the rock and roll music described in this short story. Even within Vietnam, before the many boat escapes that created the Vietnamese global diaspora, Vietnamese culture was well and truly shifting. 'In 1965, as U.S. Marines were landing on the beach in Da Nang, Elvis wrote "Vua Xa Lo" ["King of the Road"] and "Bat Duoc Cung Roi!" ["I got You Babe!"]' (52). The reader can almost hear these pop tunes as soon their titles are mentioned. The conceit of these 'translations' is that they suggest that the Vietnamese song came first, and that it is merely a coincidence that there are famous US pop songs which match the translations. By suggesting such cultural porosity Dinh undercuts nationalist fervour(s) existing on all sides in relation to the politically charged date of 30 April 1975.

For the bilingual reader, the 'translations' are even more hilarious because they are preposterously literal. For example, 'Bat Duoc Cung Roi!' could be (re)translated into English as: 'I've *caught* you my darling', rather than Sonny and Cher's 'I Got You Babe'. Dinh plays with 'surface' story in order to make transparent the process of being culturally 'translated'. In fact, the process of exact translation can be the very obstacle to actual communication. While meaning may have been (partially and literally) translated, the contextualising mood, music and social mores that would have accompanied these songs are shown to have been ... lost in translation.

There is often an assumption that the text will be diminished and rendered inferior by translation. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi point out 'It is important also to remember that the language of "loss" has featured so strongly in many comments on translation. Robert Frost, for example, claimed that "poetry is what gets lost in translation"' (Bassnett and Trivedi 4). In Dinh's work, however, translation is a tool for enhancement and enlargement, and what is gained is often hilarious. It seems that all sorts of meanings can be attributed where none

was intended, and thus translation clears a space for creative play for the 1.5 Generation writer:

From the beginning, Elvis was in sync with his time. His career coincided with and mirrored the Vietnam War. The Vietnam War made the man, made him write music, made him sing. In an interview published in *Viet Rock!*, June 22 1967, Elvis Phong famously declared: 'The din of hate provides the backbeat to my love songs'. During live concerts, Elvis would shout to his screaming audience, 'I write broken songs for all you broken people!'. (2)

Dinh does not attempt to create a realist version of the fateful day. His deployment of impressionism is, I propose, a way to counter the simplification of historical events that is promoted by linguistic colonisation. This impressionist strategy suggests that the past is not a world that can be translated into this time and place in a completely neutral way, and that perhaps the use of Standard English in the realism project obscures this from us. 'Elvis Phong is Dead' ends with a climax of cultural (mis)translation:

In 1968, the year of the infernal Tet Offensive, in which 64,000 people were killed, 120,000 injured, 630,000 left homeless, Elvis released what must be considered his magnum opus, a monster compilation of delirious songs called *Dia Trang* [*The White Album*]. White, one must remember, is the Vietnamese colour of mourning. (53)

Dinh's peppering of Vietnamese throughout the text is a strategy to reinforce an in-between cultural and linguistic identity — not just in the content of the writing, but in its very poetics. In contrast, the choice to use homogenised English in these short stories would serve to reinforce the construct of a stable and delineated cultural identity. Dinh writes across languages, rather than being completely in one language or another, and his poetics of translation enhances the content of his work.

In an interview for a Vietnamese diasporic website, Linh Dinh is questioned by renowned first generation author Phạm Thị Hoài about his bilingualism:

Phạm Thị Hoài: [P]hải ở một ngôn ngữ quen thuộc mới vướng vào những quy định và ràng buộc của nó. Anh chắc là chưa vướng, nhưng đã nhìn ra một số ràng buộc nhất định của tiếng Việt, có lẽ nhìn ra rõ hơn người trong cuộc?

[It's only when one is caught within a language that one feels entangled by its stipulations and limitations. You seem to not yet be caught in the Vietnamese language, but have recognised some of its bindings, perhaps seeing them more clearly than those who are within the language?]

Dinh Linh: Thật sự thì tôi không rõ những ràng buộc nhất định của tiếng Việt là gì. Đối với tiếng Việt, và cả tiếng Anh, tôi chỉ là một thằng Tây ba lô, một du khách trong ngôn ngữ. Người du khách có thể nhận thấy rất nhiều điều ngộ nghĩnh mà người bản xứ, vì đã ở lâu một nơi, sẽ khó thấy được. Người du khách quả là một trẻ thơ, và nhà thơ nên có sự hồn nhiên và vô tư của một đứa con nít. Không nên ngu như con nít, chỉ nên hồn nhiên như con nít thôi [my emphasis].

[In truth, I do not know exactly what the entanglements and stipulations of the Vietnamese language are. *With regards to both English and Vietnamese, I feel like a*

'back-packer' to both languages, a tourist in [the country of] language. As a visitor, I am able to recognise things that a native can no longer perceive because he has remained in one place for so long. The tourist is like a child, and a poet should be child-like and free of worries. Not stupid like a child, just child-like. (online my translation))

Dinh's response suggests that, as tourists in [the country of] language, the 1.5 Generation may be ambivalent about language, and that this is in fact an ontological condition of the 1.5 Generation writer. As Sherry Simon argues, this bilingual awareness 'can only accentuate the false security of the mother tongue. All language becomes denaturalized, distanced' (69–70). Authors of the 1.5 Generation can be deeply ambivalent about language itself because as cultural translators they invariably come up against limitations in Standard English to fully convey their post-colonial identity — one which is constantly shifting.

As proposed earlier, 1.5 Generation writers can make use of two main strategies to remain culturally distinct while writing in the dominant language. Each has variable degrees of efficacy in different situations. Realism is a useful strategy to communicate the content of diasporic identity, especially when communicating with monolingual English-language readers, as it confers validity to what was only recently perceived as an ontological impossibility. However, beyond describing the 'what' of interstitial identity, realism does not wholly convey this shifting identification (the 'how' of being in-between cultures). Hence the need for some 1.5 Generation writers to turn to impressionism to mitigate against the invisibility of the 'seamless translation'.

CONCLUSION

Creative writers of the 1.5 Generation are positioned between the first and the second generation, which casts them in the role of cultural and linguistic translators due to their bilingual capacity and bi-culturality. The 1.5 Generation's identification shifts along a continuum of otherness. The aphorism 'translator, traitor' applies more so to this generation than the first or second generation, because in order to participate in literary production, these authors must constantly return to the question 'who is translating whom and for what purpose'? Their answers to this do not remain constant, as the cultural and linguistic gap shifts over time and in different circumstances of cultural production and political contexts. This suggests that the 1.5 Generation's identification is redefined with each new creative work.

These authors must enact creative strategies to resist invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonisation. The choice of strategies to employ, therefore, changes according to the particularities of the cultural and linguistic gap at play during literary production. The most distinctive works by 1.5 Generation authors are the ones which seek to 'decolonize themselves from two oppressors at once' (Mehrez qtd in Prasad 55) in writing across languages to play with 'overheard' messages, to (re)position and (re)translate themselves and their readers.

Finally, as these authors (re)define their cultural ‘identification’ with each new work, they remind us all of our own shifting positioning, and conversely, our role in determining the positioning of others.

NOTES

- ¹ I use the phrase ‘Vietnam war’ not in the Western sense of a war fought by the USA and its allies against North Vietnam (mirrored by Vietnam’s description of it as the ‘American War’). Instead, I use ‘Vietnam war’ to recognise that it was also a civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.
- ² 1.5 Generation American-Vietnamese writer, Linh Dinh is the exception that proves the rule. He has translated his poems into Vietnamese and has edited collections of translated short stories. To date, he has only composed one poem directly in Vietnamese. <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=961&rb=07>.

WORKS CITED

- Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, H. 1989, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, Routledge, London.
- Bartley, Allen & Paul Spoonley 2009, ‘Intergenerational Transnationalism: 1.5 Generation Asian Migrants in New Zealand’, *International Migration*, 46.4, pp. 63–84.
- Bassnett, Susan & Harish Trivedi 1999, ‘Introduction: Of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars’, *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett, & Trivedi Harish, Routledge, London, pp. 1–18.
- Cao, Lan 1997, *The Monkey Bridge*, Penguin Books, New York.
- Danico, Mary Yu 2004, *The 1.5 Generation: Becoming Korean American in Hawai’i*, U of Hawaii P, Honolulu.
- Dinh, Linh 2000, *Fake House: Stories*, Seven Stories Press, New York.
- 2004, ‘Elvis Phong Is Dead’, *Blood and Soap*, Seven Stories Press, New York, pp. 51–53.
- Fanon, Frantz 1991, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, Grove Weidenfeld, New York.
- Hall, Stuart 1990, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence & Wishart, London, pp. 222–37.
- Janette, Michele 2003, ‘Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1963–1994’, *Amerasia Journal*, 29.1, pp. 267–86.
- Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 2007, ‘Luu vong nhu mot pham tru tham my’, *May van de phe binh va ly thuyet van hoc*, Van Moi, California, pp. 251–81.
- Park, Kyeyoung 1999, ‘“I really do feel I’m 1.5!” The Construction of Self and Community by Young Korean Americans’, *Amerasia Journal*, 25.1, pp. 139–63.

- Pelaud, Isabelle Thuy 2005, 'Entering Linh Dinh's Fake House: Literature of Displacement', *Amerasia Journal*, 31.2, pp. 37–49.
- Phạm Thị Hoài 2002, 'Interview with Dinh, Linh', online, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=961&rb=07>, accessed 20th August 2009.
- Prasad, G.J.V 1999, 'Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Routledge, London, pp. 41–57.
- Schafer, John C. 2006, *Võ Phiến and the Sadness of Exile*, Southeast Asia Publications, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Illinois.
- Simon, Sherry 1999, 'Translating and Interlingual Creation in the Contact Zone: Border Writing in Quebec', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Routledge, London, pp. 58–74.
- Trouilloud, Lise-Hélène 2005, Beyond the Refugee Experience: Redefining Exile, *Métissage*, and The Aesthetics of Representation in Vietnamese Diasporic Literature from France and North America, PhD Diss. University of California Davis, 2005, ProQuest, University of Melbourne Lib, 26 Feb. 2009 <http://www.proquest.com>.
- Tymoczko, Maria 1999, 'Post-colonial Writing and Literary Translation', *Post-colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, Routledge, London, pp. 19–40.
- Vertovec, Steven 1999, 'Three Meanings of "Diaspora", Exemplified among South Asian Religions', *Diaspora* 7.2, pp. 1–37.
- Young, Robert J.C. 2003, *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction*, OUP, Oxford.

BOITRAN HUYNH-BEATTIE

Less Seen Art, Made by Vietnamese-Australian Artists

Throughout 2010, Australian SBS television viewers had the opportunity to enjoy the first episodes of *Luke Nguyen's Vietnam*, a cooking-while-travelling series, presented by Vietnamese-Australian chief chef of the Red Lantern Restaurant in Sydney. With a distinct Australian accent, he effortlessly guided audiences through the beautiful Vietnamese landscape and the exotic delights of its cuisine; charming viewers into learning about a Vietnam very different to the one universally presented through news reports of the Vietnam War.

Luke Nguyen is typical of many second-generation Vietnamese migrants whose success owes much to the efforts of their parents. The collapse of Saigon's regime in 1975 forced Nguyen's father to flee. In 1977 he escaped Vietnam by boat and arrived in Australia in 1978. The Fall of Saigon was the beginning of the greatest migration in Vietnamese history; an exodus that scattered some 2.7 million refugees who settled in about 90 different countries around the world. The Vietnamese community in Australia, with an estimated population of 200,000 is the third largest (after the US and France), and the Vietnamese language is the sixth most spoken in Australia (after English, Chinese, Italian, Greek and Arabic). This introduction presents a familiar story about the Vietnamese community in Australia. This article however, tells a lesser known and controversial facet of Vietnamese-Australian visual art culture.

ART IN THE EYES OF BEHOLDERS

MY LE THI — A VISION OF HUMANITY BUT ONCE DISOWNED BY HER COMMUNITY

In 2002, the Presbyterian Ladies College (PLC) Sydney applied for and was approved the Access Asia Grant from the Board of NSW Department of Education and Training. With the Board's advice and her own research, Anita Ellis, Director of the Croydon Centre for Art, Design and Technology incorporating the Adelaide Perry Gallery of PLC, decided to invite My Le Thi as an Artist-in-Residence for four weeks. For the project, over 50 State schools (art teachers and students) came to PLC to talk to My Le Thi about her process of art making, worked with her toward an exhibition and learned more about Vietnamese culture. 'In this age of intolerance My Le Thi offers a vision of acceptance and commonality for all who walk the earth, despite colour and race' (Ellis 1). The teachers were excited to see the number and quality of artworks produced by the artist and her student-collaborators. After electing to invite a prominent Vietnamese person to launch the exhibition that My Le titled *Bốn Màu Cơ Bản* (Four Basic Colours) (fig. 1) at



Figure 1. My Le Thi, *Bốn Màu Cơ Bản* (2002), acrylic on canvas, 150 x 85 x 4 cm.

the P.L.C. Croydon Gallery, the school nominated the Vietnamese Consulate of NSW as a fitting choice. Information about the opening spread rapidly throughout the Vietnamese community, but the staff were unprepared for the harsh reaction from several of its quarters. A Vietnamese representative requested that My Le Thi cancel her show, the editor of the Vietnamese weekly, *Saigon Times*,¹ threatened to wage a protest in front of the school, and the president of the Sydney branch of the Vietnamese Community Association sent an email to the artist categorically disowning her.

Throughout her career, My Le Thi has used four basic colours (white, black, yellow and red), to represent the diversity of human skin colour and as a metaphor expressing opposition to racial discrimination. Through the use of painting, installation, and video, she expresses ideas about human feelings and her sense of justice. As Ashley Carruthers explained in the exhibition catalogue, *Voices of Minorities*, 'My Le's enduring solidarity with those who have experienced oppression, flight and persecution from culturally diverse backgrounds, including Indigenous Australians, is a testament to her broad-based capacity to empathise with the 'other'. (11) My Le Thi was included in the Asia Pacific Triennial at the Queensland Art Gallery in 2001, and between 2001–2009 her works were included in several touring exhibitions organised by Casula Powerhouse Art Centre Sydney and Ivan Dougherty Gallery of the College of Fine Arts Sydney. My Le Thi is an established Vietnamese Australian artist, who has exhibited in Germany, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan and the U.S.²

For the installation *Four Colours* (1997), My Le Thi displayed four masks of the far-right nationalist Australian politician Pauline Hanson³ in black, white, yellow and red. The work was My Le's defence of Asians and Aborigines, after Hanson proposed abolishing multiculturalism and maintained that Aborigines were no more disadvantaged than white Australians. Another installation *Naked in Public* (2001) (fig. 2), shows a small group of papier-mâché skeletons, resting or standing on the main street of the inner Sydney suburb of Marrickville, a community of Greek, Lebanese, Portuguese, Chinese and Vietnamese ethnic



Figure 2. My Le Thi, *Naked in Public* (2001). (Photo: Elisa Johnson)

groups, among others. The skeletons symbolise the fundamental character of human beings, stripped of skin colour and body shape. During the time when the Australian public became alarmed over the increasing influx of culturally diverse boat people arriving on its shores under the Howard government,⁴ My Le Thi offered her services to detainees in Sydney's Villawood Detention Centre. As part of a rehabilitation process, she urged them to create artworks to help overcome some of their trauma. Their works were included in an installation, *Behind the Fence* (fig. 3) in a travelling exhibition titled *Isle of Refuge* (2003–2005),⁵ which was curated by Ashley Carruthers, Rilka Oakley and My Le Thi at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery.

The harsh reaction from the leadership of the Sydney branch of the Vietnamese Community Association toward My Le Thi is based in an attitude that is prevalent in the diaspora — to identify, at least symbolically, with the regime of the former Republic of South Vietnam and oppose what they see as the illegitimate dictatorship of the Communist Party of Vietnam (Carruthers 2008 71). Therefore, the exhibition and everyone associated with it were threatened with a boycott, for offering the honour of opening an exhibition to the Vietnamese Communist Consulate General in Sydney.

The Vietnamese Diaspora in Australia is primarily an anti-communist refugee community and easily aggravated by all forms of communist propaganda. On the 28th October 2003, four thousand Vietnamese protested in front of the headquarters of Australia's Special Broadcast Service Radio (SBS) against the broadcast of Vietnamese news *Thời Sự* from Hanoi. The news program was regarded as a mouthpiece for communist propaganda. SBS eventually ceased the



Figure 3. My Le Thi, *Behind the Fence* (collaboration with Villawood detainees, 2004–2005). (Photo: My Le Thi)

broadcast due to the fact that *Thời Sự* generated a ‘community hurt’ even to those who only heard about it.⁶ On the 2nd November 2005, more than ten thousand Vietnamese demonstrated in front of Sydney Town Hall, against a touring music show from Vietnam entitled *Duyên Dáng Việt Nam* (Charming Vietnam



Figure 4. Mai Nguyen-Long, *Pho Dog Installation*. (Photo: Boitran Huynh-Beattie)

Gala), which was sponsored by Vietnam Airlines and the Vietnamese newspaper *Thanh Niên* (Youth) from Vietnam. This ‘Air Vietnam-funded extravaganza’ was understood to be ‘the latest and boldest initiative in an ongoing propaganda offensive aimed at infiltrating “communist” popular culture into the overseas Vietnamese community’ (Carruthers 2008 72). The protest was dominated by placards satirically stating, ‘Harming Vietnam Gala’ by dropping the ‘C’ from the original title of the show.⁷ In the end, commonsense and courage prevailed, because the exhibition went ahead, the consulate general opened it, and both My Le and the Presbyterian Ladies College received positive public response.

MAI NGUYEN-LONG — ART VERSUS CENSORSHIP

Time and again, Vietnamese Australian art exhibitions have been plagued by the diasporic community’s attempts at censorship. It is a constant burden borne by Vietnamese artists as exemplified in the touring exhibition, *I Love Pho* (2007–2009), curated by Cuong Le at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre. *I Love Pho* consisted of six artists but was slightly expanded when it travelled to Footscray Community Arts Centre Melbourne and Breadbox Gallery in Western Australia. One artist, Mai Nguyen-Long (also known as Mai Long before 2010), displayed an installation titled *Pho Dog* (fig. 4), consisting of twelve mythical papier-mâché mongrel dogs. Born to a Vietnamese father and Australian mother, Mai Nguyen-Long spent most of her childhood and teenage years in the Philippines and Papua New Guinea.⁸ Mongrel dogs became a humorous, somewhat self-mocking portrait symbolising her hybridity but also expressing the confused world of a young expatriate, who later re-integrated into the broader Australian social landscape.

Mai Nguyen-Long’s *Pho Dog* installation triggered a considerable uproar when the exhibition opened at the Breadbox Gallery in Perth. The Perth branch of the Vietnamese Community Association singled out one of the mongrels, *Keala*, as particularly offensive because it displayed the Vietnamese communist flag beside that of the former Republic of South Vietnam (the cover); moreover, the latter was placed on the buttock of the papier-mâché dog.⁹ *Keala* is actually decorated with patterns from flags of the US and Australia as well as North and South Vietnam. The placement of these patches was inadvertent because they were spread out on a canvas without consideration for where they would end up on the body of the dog. The artist did not take into consideration the Vietnamese conventional Confucian belief that ‘the nose [of the dog] should be more precious than the buttock’.¹⁰ The mixture of patterns from these national flags not only provides a striking contrast of bright colours but also represents the mismatch of contemporary identity; moreover, it speaks to the historical tie that Vietnam had with the US and Australia. The accusation from the leaders of VCA was absurd — the patterns of both Vietnamese North and South flags run from the body to the buttock of *Keala* — but the fuss had to be made about one flag only.

The issue became more heated when it was reported on Australian Broadcasting Commission’s Television program *Lateline*, and a representative of



Figure 5. Mai Nguyen-Long, *Godog* (2009), papier mâché (avian mesh frame) 190 x 157 x 82 cm. (Photo: Mai Nguyen-Long)

the Vietnamese Community Association stated that ‘Art should not hurt people’ (Stewart online). Senior members of the Vietnamese Community Association demanded the removal of the whole installation from *I Love Pho*. As a compromise,

Mai Long accommodated the request by covering her installation with a black cloth. However, it did not satisfy the community leaders, who then threatened to boycott all her future shows, which they did. Mai Nguyen-Long's *Godog* (2009) (fig. 5) was met by a hundred or so Vietnamese protesters at the Casula railway station, opposite Sydney's Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre at the opening of the exhibition, *Nam Bang!*¹¹ Her *Godog* installation included a performance in which the artist, in a highly ritualistic ceremony, incinerated a 190cm tall papier-mâché dog as an act toward levelling any differences, hatreds and misunderstandings resulting from war and its polarities.¹²

HOANG-TRAN NGUYEN — 'HOME' OF A DISPLACED HOME

Many artworks made by Vietnamese-Australian artists continue to be inspired by Vietnam-related themes, but they do not always clash with community values. Since 2005, the Archive of Vietnamese Boat People has been organising 'Return to Shores of Freedom Tours' (to former refugee camps in Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines), enabling Viet Kieu (overseas Vietnamese around the globe), to pay respect to those who perished on their way to freedom.¹³ Hoang-Tran Nguyen was moved by media coverage of one such tour but was unable to participate. So, in 2005 he made his own solo journey to a former refugee camp on the Malaysian island of Palau Bidong. Video footage from the trip which he incorporated in his



Figure 6. Hoang-Tran Nguyen, *Location Migration 2* (2005) Site 1. (Photo: Hoang-Tran Nguyen)



Figure 7. Hoang-Tran Nguyen, *Location Migration 2* (2005) Site 2. (Photo: Hoang-Tran Nguyen)

installation, *Local Migration 2*, was also included in the 2005 *Big West Festival* in Melbourne, an event that emphasised the ‘home’ of a displaced home.¹⁴ Hoang was allocated three vacant properties provided by a real estate agency, to project the three components of his installation. The sound artist, Roger Alsop, created a soundscape for all three sites. Site 1 (fig. 6) was a vacant shop front where Hoang projected footage of the immense Pacific Ocean, taken on his way to Bidong Island. The mesmerising projection of rolling water on the huge shop window

had the threatening effect of potentially submerging the spectator. Site 2 (fig. 7) was a vacant rental property where he projected footage from a home video, made by a colleague who returned to Vietnam to relocate an ancestor's grave that would make way for a highway development. The video was made to show family members in Australia the ritual back 'home'; it presents a metaphor for the Vietnamese belief that 'Home is where the ancestor is buried'. Site 3 was a display home which he used to project a montage of an event commemorating the 25th anniversary of the original *Mad Max* film, by visiting locations in Melbourne's western suburbs where the film was made. Hoang explains: '[f]or me the Mad Max films depict characters existing in the liminal spaces of culture. I wanted to draw parallels with the Vietnamese Diaspora via a geography where the cultures intersect'.¹⁵ This video installation strongly suggested the transition and displacement of Vietnamese Australians and migrants of many other nationalities, who have arrived to the island continent by sea. Despite the fact that Hoang-Tran Nguyen was a boat person at the age of seven, and his work, *Local Migration 2*, is totally dedicated to Vietnamese refugees, the Vietnamese community took no notice of it; perhaps, because the work was too abstract for them.

GARRY TRINH

Garry Trinh is another artist who is concerned more about Australia's contemporary social issues than identification of and with his ethnic group. *Welcome Home* (2007) (fig. 8) is a series of twenty photographs of various houses with closed shutters. In these photographs 'Home, Sweet Home' has become



Figure 8. Garry Trinh, *Welcome Home* (2007), House 2 (series of 20). (Photo: Garry Trinh)

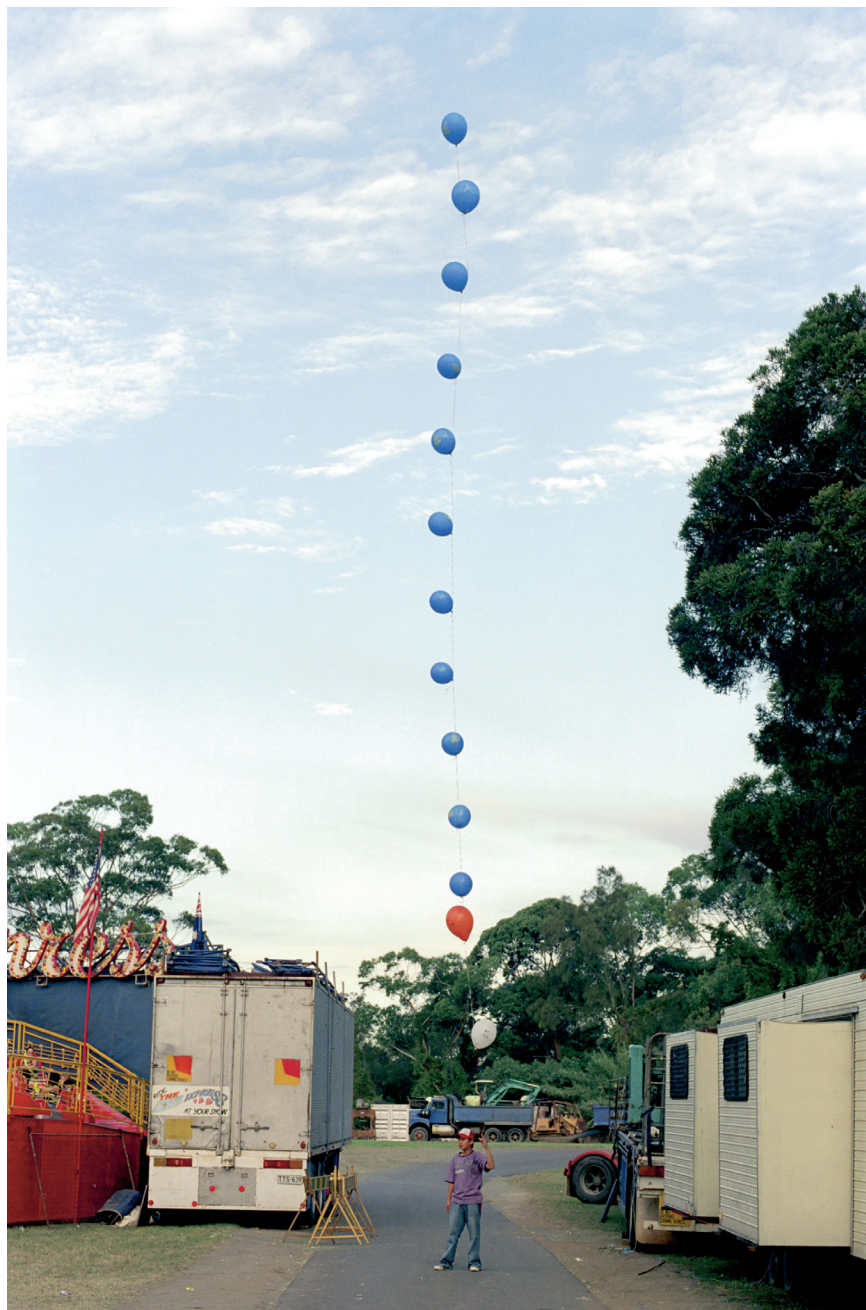


Figure 9. Garry Trinh, *Balloons*. (Photo: Garry Trinh)

a fortress, protecting the residents from uncertainty and violation. Ironically, *Welcome Home* refers to the xenophobia of the residents in western Sydney where the majority of people are migrants. Inevitably, these ‘fortified homes’ — as the artist calls them — deliver a message of fear.¹⁶

Garry Trinh arrived in western Sydney as a child refugee with his family, and his photographs overtly express love, concern and curiosity about that social environment. Recently, he took ‘photo-walks’ through several western Sydney suburbs, using his camera to create a visual diary of the space, the community, its development, (and under-development). In one photograph titled *Balloons* (fig. 9) that was taken at the Tet Festival (Vietnamese Lunar New Year), the location encapsulates the environment of ‘Westies’ (industrial, working class), and the line of thirteen balloons rising high in the sky, symbolises the hope of ‘Aspirational Australians’ (hard-working and economically successful).¹⁷ Many of Trinh’s images highlight the absurdity and artificiality of the man-made environment when it invades nature: advertising billboards in weird juxtapositions, a dead fruit bat lying on the pavement partly covered by dried leaves, trees entangled by a tiled front yard (Lelick and Ruhle). Garry Trinh is not just a photographer taking snapshots; his photography records what could have easily been unseen.

KHUE NGUYEN

Gary Trinh and Khue Nguyen belong to Generation 1.5, that is, they were born in their homeland but grew up and were educated in another country. Their narratives and visual language are contemporary and relate to a wide spectrum of communities such as Australians of refugee backgrounds, those of other non-English backgrounds, and environmental groups. Khue Nguyen, an artist of the first generation, is an example of the talents brought to Australia through waves of boat people. He graduated from the Fine Arts College of Ho Chi Minh City (formerly Saigon National Fine Arts College). Both his parents taught at the college until the communist government reshuffled the staff in the 1980s to better accommodate the new political environment. In 2010, Khue Nguyen became the first Vietnamese finalist in the prestigious Australian Archibald Portrait Prize held at the Art Gallery of New South Wales. His portrait, *Unleashed* (2009), (fig. 10) portrays Khue’s profile, integrated into his personal journey which involves conflict with his Vietnamese heritage and his sexual preference. With extraordinary detail Khue’s head seems to burst into a chaotic world — symbolic images of dragons’ claws, fish, octopuses, male and female genitalia, surrounding a pair of stapled lips. Khue’s face expresses the serenity of a meditative person, but inside his head there is anarchy — the result of the journey from his homeland to Australia and his recognition of his homosexuality.

Fly Me To The Moon (2010) (fig. 11) presents a muscular male torso seen from the back, positioned as if about to fly, and *Never Felt This Way* (2010) portrays only the back of a man. However, both strongly express human emotions and vulnerability and belong to a new series titled *In Search of Sensuality*, which



Figure 10. Khue Nguyen, *Unleashed* (2009), watercolour and pencil on paper, 100 x 75 cm.
(Photo: Khue Nguyen)

will be exhibited at Art Atrium gallery in Sydney, to coincide with the 2011 Mardi Gras Festival. Khue has a great knowledge of human anatomy, (through training in the Paris Beaux Arts tradition at the Fine Arts College of Ho Chi Minh City).



Figure 11. Khue Nguyen, *Fly Me to the Moon* (2010), mixed media on paper, 38 x 48 cm. (Photo: Khue Nguyen)

His new works are delicate, mobile and vigorous, referring to the traditional humanist qualities associated with the Italian Renaissance artist Michelangelo. One reviewer of the Italian draughtsman wrote: 'Michelangelo sets motion free. His figures at the gallery seem to wrestle for perfection. Their immense shoulders turn, their ribs and muscles ripple. Their bodies know no peace' (Richard 1). Similarly, Khue's characters present 'movements' of their bodies with internalised emotions. (William Yang, Speech at the Opening). *In Search of Sensuality* did not receive any harsh reactions from the conservative Vietnamese community; in contrast, one of the works was purchased by a Vietnamese. One wonders if negative criticism happens only in references of the subject-matter and gender of the artist. (So far, only woman artists have been singled out for attention [My Le Thi and Mai Nguyen-Long not being the only cases].)

LESS SEEN THAN WHAT?

Australians have been progressively exposed to more and more Asian art throughout the 1990s, after the nation's multiculturalism policy was augmented by the influx of Indochinese refugees in the late 1970s and 1980s, and Chinese migrants after the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989. Various exhibitions of Asian art were either brought in from Asia, or organised by Asian artists living in Australia, with the facilities of a few galleries and regional museums. Gallery 4A (Asia-Australia Arts Centre) was founded in 1996 by Melissa Chiu, an expert in Chinese art. Sherman Gallery was established in 1981 as a consequence of the Director Gene Sherman's strong interest in Japanese and Chinese art. Ray Hughes Gallery was established in Brisbane in 1969 and in Sydney in 1985, and is credited with collecting and selling Chinese art well before it became a trend. White Rabbit Gallery was founded in 2000 by Kerr and Judith Neilson and according to the blurb on its website, it has 'one of the largest and most significant collections of contemporary Chinese art' (online).

The Asia Pacific Triennials (APT) at the Queensland Art Gallery and Gallery of Modern Art has offered Australians the opportunity to see Vietnamese art from Vietnam since 1993. Alison Carroll, Art Director of Asialink, was in charge of Vietnamese art in the first APT (1993), which showcased only one Vietnamese artist (Nguyen Xuan Tiep) due to the limits of time, budget and communication (the Vietnamese authorities did not have any concept about curatorship at the time).¹⁸ The second APT (1996) presented three artists (Vu Dan Tan, Mai Anh Dung, and Dang Thi Khue); the third APT (1999) again exhibited three artists (Nguyen Minh Thanh, Nguyen Trung Tin and Vu Thang). Vietnamese art selected for the second and third APTs was collated by Ian Howard, the Director of Queensland College of Art, who at the time carried out an exchange program with the Fine Arts College of Hanoi, which resulted in a documentary video recorded by Ian Lang, *the Art of Place Hanoi-Brisbane Art Exchange* (1995) and two exhibitions in Hanoi and Brisbane. The fourth APT (2002) which was designed to represent 'a core group of influential artists from the Asia-Pacific region who have challenged and shaped

the course of contemporary art and modern culture over the past four decades' (QAG website) showed no Vietnamese artists. The fifth APT (2005) consisted of a commissioned project by Vietnamese-American artist, Dinh Q. Le: *The Farmers and the Helicopters* and *The Lotusland*, and a Vietnamese film directed by Viet Linh. The latest APT (2010) presented Jun Nguyen-Hatsushiba and Bui Cong Khanh. All these works that showed in the Queensland Art Gallery and the Gallery of Modern Art were exempt from Vietnamese extremists' censorship. It is not clear whether the leadership of the Vietnamese community in Brisbane is less politicised than that in Sydney, or whether the works just did not provoke their sensibility.

Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in Sydney (CPAC) is another publicly funded space that has consistently curated exhibitions of or including Vietnamese-Australian artists.¹⁹ However, CPAC is not a commercial enterprise, and cannot promote artists the way marketing processes require. Furthermore, CPAC has been 'handicapped by discord within the local city council' (Japser 27) and the resonance of protests in 2009 by a small group of Vietnamese-Australians that has discouraged its future involvement with Vietnamese-Australian artists.²⁰ In this social and cultural context, art made by Vietnamese-Australian artists has less chance of being showcased than that by other Australian artists of Asian backgrounds.

When Australia decided that it was in Asia, it wanted to get involved and engage with Asian countries and their people. In the case of Vietnam, it is hard to imagine that there would be any cultural engagement on a national level between Australia and Vietnam that would bypass 'a community hurt', a cross to bear for Vietnamese-Australian artists. Any cultural products from Vietnam would be seen as 'pro-communist propaganda' and would be protested by the leadership of the Vietnamese community. The five artists presented in this article were selected because their works help define the contemporary portrait of Australia — the multicultural Australia. These works created by Vietnamese-Australian artists cross borders; they are a fusion of different influences, but primarily they speak about and to the current issues of Australia. Despite the pressure of political sensitivity and indifference, art made by Vietnamese-Australian artists continues to be created, simply because the artists want to express themselves. Less seen or more seen, is another matter.

NOTES

¹ *Saigon Times* became a monthly from July 2010.

² For more on My Le Thi's works, see Melissa Chiu, 'Shifting Frames of Reference: Asian Australian Women Artists'.

³ Former leader of the now defunct One Nation party. For more information, see Denise Woods, 'Australia in Asia: Negotiating Pauline Hanson in the Southeast Asian Press'.

⁴ Prime Minister John Howard led a Liberal Party government from 1996 to 2007.

- ⁵ Between 2003 and 2005, *Isle of Refuge* travelled to 24 Hr Art Gallery, Darwin and Araluen Galleries Alice Springs Cultural Precinct of Northern Territory, Flinders University Gallery in Adelaide, Monash University Museum of Art in Victoria, Fremantle Arts Centre in Western Australia and Museum of Brisbane in Queensland.
- ⁶ Ien Ang, Gay Hawkins and Lamia Dabbousy observe that '[t]he VCA [Vietnamese Community Association] did not represent the whole Vietnamese community in Australia, only a certain highly organised section of it' (46); Carruthers agrees: '[i]ndeed if there's one thing the VCA does well, it's organising a protest' (151).
- ⁷ For Carruthers' observations see 'The Imagined Homeland of the Vietnamese Diaspora' pp. 150–52. The Vietnamese community in Australia by and large includes refugees (boat people) and migrants. The Vietnamese Community Association (VCA), however, represents only the political view of anti-communists. Carruthers' essay presents more context and explanation of the complex duality of Vietnamese politics in Australia.
- ⁸ Mai Nguyen-Long talked about her past to Neil Manton in 'Unheard Voices: Asian Artists in Australia'.
- ⁹ For more details see Hoa Pham, 'Pho Dog Fuss'.
- ¹⁰ Vietnamese, for instance, do not approve of others touching their heads, for the head is seen as 'a place to worship ancestors'.
- ¹¹ *Nam Bang!* was curated by Boitran Huynh-Beattie at Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in April–June 2009. It voiced the aftermath of the Vietnam War through intergenerational perspectives by 25 artists from Australia, France, Korea, New Zealand, USA and Vietnam.
- ¹² For further development of this issue, see Boitran Huynh-Beattie, 'A Long Journey'.
- ¹³ Archive of Vietnamese Boat People website: <http://www.vnbp.org/english/index2.htm>.
- ¹⁴ For more information about the BigWest Festival, see http://www.bigwest.com.au/fileadmin/site_files/archives/program05.pdf.
- ¹⁵ Interview with the artist through email on 10 January 2011.
- ¹⁶ For more of Garry Trinh's works, see his website: <http://www.garrytrinh.com/>
- ¹⁷ For more analysis about Aspirational and Westies, see See Gabrielle Gwyther, 'Once Were Westies', and "From Cowpastures to Pigs" Heads: the Development and Character of Western Sydney'.
- ¹⁸ See Alison Carroll, 'Myths and Histories; A Vietnamese Story'.
- ¹⁹ Such as: *Vietnam Voices* (1997–2001 and 2009) curated by Kon Gouriotis and Adam Lucas, *9 Lives* curated by Debra Porch (1999), *Generation 1.5*, and *I Love Pho* curated by Cuong Le, and *Nam Bang!* (2009) curated by Boitran Huynh-Beattie.
- ²⁰ Two proposals that were Vietnam-related were postponed by Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre in 2010.

WORKS CITED

- Ang, Ien, Gay Hawkins and Lamia Dabbousy 2008, *The SBS Story: The Challenge of Cultural Diversity*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Carroll, Alison 2002, 'Myths and Histories: A Vietnamese Story', *Artlink*, 20.2, pp. 17–18.
- Carruthers, Ashley 2007, 'Being in the Minority', *Voices of Minority*, exhibition catalogue, ed. Hoàng Ngọc-Tuân and Ray Beattie, Boitran Huynh-Beattie,

- Sydney, pp. 11–12.
- 2009, 'The Imagined Homeland of the Vietnamese Diaspora', *Nam Bang!* Catalogue, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney, pp. 150–152.
- 2008, 'Saigon from the Diaspora', *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, 29.1, pp. 68–86.
- Chiu, Melissa 2001, 'Shifting Frames of Reference: Asian Australian Women Artists', *Text and Subtext, Contemporary Art and Asian Woman*, ed. Binghui Huangfu, Earl Lu Gallery, Singapore, pp. 88–95.
- Ellis, Anita 2002, 'Introduction', *Bốn Màu Cơ Bản*, Presbyterian Ladies College and the Board of the Department of Education and Training, Croyden, pp. 1–2.
- Gwyther, Gabrielle 2008, 'Once Were Westies', *Griffith Review, Cities on the Edge*, Winter, pp. 155–64.
- 2008, "'From Cowpastures to Pigs" Heads: The Development and Character of Western Sydney', *Sydney Journal*, 1.3 online, http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/sydney_journal/article/viewFile/885/947, accessed on 5th January 2011.
- Hoa Pham 2009, 'Pho Dog Fuss', *Peril*, online, <http://www.peril.com.au/edition6/pho-dog-fuss>, accessed 30th April 2010.
- Hoang-Tran Nguyen 2011, "email correspondence" 10th January.
- Huynh-Beattie, Boitran 2009, 'A Long Journey', *Nam Bang!*, Casula Powerhouse, Sydney, pp. 8–17.
- Jasper, Adam 2008, 'Curating a Psycho-Geography: Campbelltown Arts Centre and the Genius of Lisa Havilah', *Artlink*, 28.4, pp. 24–27.
- Lelick, Tom and Ivan Ruhle 2010, 'Matters of Necessity in the Endless City: Garry Trinh, Artist/Photographer Extraordinaire', *Runway*, 16, pp. 42–47.
- Manton, Neil 1999, 'Unheard Voices: Asian Artists in Australia', *Artlink*, 19.2, pp. 65–66.
- Richard, Paul 1988, 'The Muscular Mastery of Michelangelo', *The Washington Post*, 9th October, p. g 01.
- Stewart, John 2008, 'Flag Sparks Censorship Row', *ABC Lateline*, 21st November, online, <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2008/s2426887.htm>.
- White Rabbit Gallery, <http://www.whiterabbitcollection.org/>
- Woods, Denise 2000, 'Australia in Asia: Negotiating Pauline Hanson in the Southeast Asian Press', *Alter/Asian: Asian-Australian Identities in Art*, ed. Ien Ang, Pluto Press, Sydney, pp. 263–75.

Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt

SPEECH OF A POET

Ladies and gentlemen,

Today I come here not to talk to you.

Today I come here to talk to myself.

Today I come here to talk to myself about things that I cannot talk to anybody else.

Today you come here not to listen to me talking to you.

Today you come here to listen to me talking to myself.

Your presence and your quiet and patient listening are necessary conditions for the talk today.

Without these conditions, the talk today cannot take place, although the audience of the talk today is not you, but myself.

You do not need to understand what I talk about.

You do not need to oppose or agree with what I talk about.

You only need to keep quiet and listen to me.

Only need to listen.

No need to understand.

Only need to listen to my voice.

Only need to listen to the way I am uttering sounds, changing tones, altering volumes, varying speeds, modifying pitches, mutating rhythms, repeating, expanding, improvising and ending.

You do not need to know what I am talking to myself about.

If you have any feedback, please say it to yourself.

This conversation from now on will be the conversation between you and yourself.

I do not need to know.

Now I only request you to patiently and quietly listen to my voice until my talk finishes.

Respectfully thank you.

(translated from Vietnamese by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn)

DIỆN VĂN CỬA NHÀ THƠ

Kính thưa quý vị,

Hôm nay tôi đến đây không phải để nói chuyện với quý vị.

Hôm nay tôi đến đây để nói chuyện với chính tôi.

Hôm nay tôi đến đây để nói với chính tôi những điều tôi không thể nói với bất kỳ ai khác.

Hôm nay quý vị đến đây không phải để lắng nghe tôi nói chuyện với quý vị.

Hôm nay quý vị đến đây để lắng nghe tôi nói chuyện với chính tôi.

Sự hiện diện của quý vị cùng sự im lặng và kiên nhẫn lắng nghe của quý vị là những điều kiện cần thiết cho cuộc nói chuyện hôm nay.

Không có những điều kiện ấy, cuộc nói chuyện hôm nay không thể diễn ra, mặc dù đối tượng của cuộc nói chuyện hôm nay không phải là quý vị, mà là chính tôi.

Quý vị không cần phải hiểu những gì tôi nói.

Quý vị không cần phải chống đối hay đồng ý với những gì tôi nói.

Quý vị chỉ cần lắng nghe tôi nói.

Quý vị chỉ cần im lặng và kiên nhẫn lắng nghe tôi nói.

Chỉ cần lắng nghe thôi.

Không cần hiểu.

Chỉ cần lắng nghe tiếng nói của tôi.

Chỉ cần lắng nghe cách tôi phát âm, chuyển giọng, lấy hơi, tăng giảm cường độ, tăng giảm tốc độ, tăng giảm cao độ, thay đổi tiết tấu, lặp lại, khai triển, ứng biến và kết thúc.

Quý vị không cần phải biết tôi đang nói với chính tôi điều gì.

Nếu quý vị có bất cứ điều gì muốn phản hồi xin quý vị hãy nói với chính quý vị.

Cuộc đối thoại từ đây trở đi sẽ là cuộc đối thoại giữa quý vị với chính quý vị.

Tôi không cần biết.

Bây giờ tôi chỉ yêu cầu quý vị kiên nhẫn im lặng lắng nghe tiếng nói của tôi cho đến khi cuộc nói chuyện của tôi chấm dứt.

Trân trọng cảm ơn quý vị.

Trần Lộc Bình

THE POET

He is confined in the prison of words
 The prison is totally made of words
 Its fences are built of words
 Its walls are paved with words
 Its bars are forged with words
 All policemen and correctional officers are also words
 Rations supplied twice a day are words
 Dry, hard and tough words. He pours them into his mouth, chews and swallows,
 and often feels pain in his throat
 He prefers porridge. Porridge is also made of words, soft and wet, no need to
 chew, naturally dissolved in mouth.

He has lived in this prison for how many years who knows
 The cell is dark
 Every day he sees the sun going past the narrow barred window exactly one
 time
 The sun is made of words, bloody red
 At times he also sees the moon going past the same place
 The moon is made of words, sometimes pale white, sometimes deep green
 Otherwise, he sees nothing else

Once he committed suicide
 He put his head into the noose dangling from the ceiling of the cell
 The noose was braided with words, including many foreign words
 He was not dead. But the noose was encased so deeply into his neck that it could
 not be removed anymore
 Now wherever he goes, he drags a rope behind him, clattering

He found a pistol and shot his own head
 The bullet was made of words
 From his head, some wet and viscous words flowed out
 Slopping on his face, forming scars
 Where the bullet pierced through was a very deep hole
 Somebody called it an 'abyss'
 But he was not dead

To destroy himself, he eats himself
 He eats slowly, gradually

Eating upwards: legs, groin, abdomen, chest and finally his arms

Only the head remains

He cannot eat his own head

He cannot bite, chew and swallow his nose, eyes, ears, forehead, chin, nape and skull

Though they are very near

And he really wants to

The last two things he can eat are his lips and tongue

But, feeling scared for the first time, he dares not eat his lips and tongue

He knows even if he eats his lips and tongue he is still not dead

He will continue to live with a head made of words, scrawny, lonely and silent

He feels scared

No, he must keep his lips

To smile and kiss (if possible)

He must keep his tongue

To talk, cry and swear, when necessary

(translated from Vietnamese by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn)

NHÀ THƠ

Hắn bị nhốt trong nhà tù của chữ
Toàn bộ nhà tù làm bằng chữ
Hàng rào dựng bằng chữ
Tường vách xây bằng chữ
Các chấn song được đúc bằng chữ
Cả công an và quân giáo cũng là chữ
Đồ ăn được cấp phát hai lần mỗi ngày là chữ
Những chữ khô, cứng và dai. Hắn đồ vào miệng, nhai và nuốt, nhiều khi đau
buốt cả cổ
Hắn thích ăn cháo hơn. Cháo cũng được chế tạo bằng chữ, mềm và ướt, không
cần nhai, tự nhiên tan trong miệng

Hắn sống trong nhà tù không biết bao nhiêu năm
Phòng giam tối
Mỗi ngày hắn thấy mặt trời đi qua vuông cửa nhỏ có song chấn đứng một lần
Mặt trời bằng chữ, đồ nọc
Thỉnh thoảng hắn cũng thấy mặt trăng đi ngang qua nơi ấy
Mặt trăng bằng chữ, có khi trắng nhợt, có khi xanh mướt
Ngoài ra, hắn không thấy gì nữa cả

Có lần hắn tự tử
Hắn dút đầu hắn vào sợi dây thòng lọng treo lơ lửng từ nóc phòng giam
Sợi dây được kết bằng chữ; nhiều chữ là tiếng nước ngoài
Hắn không chết. Nhưng sợi dây ăn sâu vào cổ hắn không thể nào gỡ ra được
Đi đâu hắn cũng kéo lê sợi dây theo, xúng xoảng

Hắn tìm được một khẩu súng và tự bắn vào đầu
Viên đạn làm bằng chữ
Từ đầu hắn, mấy chữ con con ươn ướt nhọn nhót chảy trào ra
Tràn lên mặt, thành những vết sẹo
Nơi viên đạn xuyên vào là một cái lỗ sâu hoắm
Có người gọi là “hố thẳm”
Nhưng hắn không chết

Để tự huỷ diệt, hắn ăn chính hắn
Hắn ăn dần, ăn dần
Từ dưới lên: chân, háng, bụng, ngực và cuối cùng là hai cánh tay
Chỉ còn cái đầu

Hắn không thể ăn cái đầu hắn được
Hắn không thể cắn, nhai và nuốt cái mũi, đôi mắt, lỗ tai, cái trán, cái cằm, cái
gáy và cái sọ của hắn được
Dù chúng rất gần
Và hắn rất muốn

Hai vật cuối cùng hắn có thể ăn được là đôi môi và cái lưỡi của hắn

Nhưng, lần đầu tiên run sợ, hắn không dám ăn đôi môi và cái lưỡi
Hắn biết cho dù ăn hết đôi môi và cái lưỡi, hắn vẫn không thể chết được
Hắn sẽ sống tiếp với cái đầu bằng chữ lông lốc, cô đơn và câm lặng
Hắn sợ

Không, hắn phải dành đôi môi lại

Để cười và để hôn (nếu có thể)

Hắn phải dành cái lưỡi lại

Để nói, khóc và chửi, khi cần

Phan Quỳnh Trâm

ON WORDS

K.

I read

I read top-down

I read bottom-up

from left to right

from right to left

I read from the front

I read from behind

slowly

faster

I read the first part

the mid-part

the last part

I finger

I contemplate

every single word

every single word

every single word

period

comma

colon

semi-colon

hyphen

slash

parenthesis

quotation mark

exclamation mark

ellipsis

question mark

question mark

ellipsis

question mark

words and symbols

not drawn from you, K.

not from you...

passion/betrayal

from the love of the words

for the sake of the words

ON WORDS (THE REVERSE)

for the sake of the words
 from the love of the words
 passion/betrayal

not from you...
 not drawn from you, K.
 words and symbols

question mark
 ellipsis

question mark
 question mark
 ellipsis
 exclamation mark
 quotation mark
 parenthesis
 slash
 hyphen
 semi-colon
 colon
 comma
 period

every single word
 every single word
 every single word
 I contemplate
 I finger

the last part
 the mid-part

I read the first part
 faster
 slowly

I read from behind

I read from the front

from right to left
 from left to right

I read bottom-up

I read top-down

I read

K.

(translated from Vietnamese by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn)

DẤU/CHỮ

K.

B. đọc

B. đọc xuôi

B. đọc ngược

B. đọc từ trái qua phải

B. đọc từ phải qua trái

B. đọc từ đằng trước

B. đọc từ đằng sau

B. đọc chậm

B. đọc mau

B. đọc đoạn đầu

B. đọc đoạn giữa

B. đọc đoạn cuối

B. mân mê

B. ngắm nghía

từng chữ

từng chữ

từng chữ

từng dấu chấm

từng dấu phẩy

từng dấu chấm phẩy

từng dấu hai chấm

từng dấu ngoặc đơn

từng dấu ngoặc kép

từng dấu gạch ngang

từng dấu gạch chéo

từng dấu chấm than

từng dấu ba chấm

từng dấu chấm hỏi

chấm hỏi

ba chấm

chấm hỏi

những dấu, những chữ không đi ra từ K.

tình yêu/sự phản bội

đến từ những dấu/chữ

DẤU/CHỮ (NGƯỢC LẠI)

đến từ những dấu/chữ
tình yêu/sự phản bội

những dấu, những chữ không đi ra từ K.

chấm hỏi

ba chấm

chấm hỏi

từng dấu chấm hỏi
từng dấu ba chấm
từng dấu chấm than
từng dấu gạch chéo
từng dấu gạch ngang
từng dấu ngoặc kép
từng dấu ngoặc đơn
từng dấu hai chấm
từng dấu chấm phẩy
từng dấu phẩy
từng dấu chấm

từng chữ

từng chữ

từng chữ

B. ngắm nghía

B. mân mê

B. đọc đoạn cuối

B. đọc đoạn giữa

B. đọc đoạn đầu

B. đọc mau

B. đọc chậm

B. đọc từ đằng sau

B. đọc từ đằng trước

B. đọc từ phải qua trái

B. đọc từ trái qua phải

B. đọc ngược

B. đọc xuôi

B. đọc

K.

MICHAEL JACKLIN

Southeast Asian Writing in Australia: The Case of Vietnamese Writing

Literatures in languages other than English produced by migrant or diasporic communities pose intriguing questions for both matters of cultural sustainability and national literatures. Dan Duffy, in his article on Vietnamese-Canadian author Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *Two Shores / Deux Rives*, begins by describing a visit to the Boston Public Library where he chances upon a surprisingly substantial collection of Vietnamese-language publications. Among the twenty shelves of books, he finds not only fiction published in Vietnam before 1975, American editions of post-1975 Vietnamese literature and translations of American novels into Vietnamese, but also a large number of creative works in Vietnamese both written and published in the United States. He pitches this opening as an 'arrival scene', borrowing the rhetoric of ethnography to refer to the arrival of the researcher among the subject of his or her study. Duffy is, in fact, an American literary scholar whose area of expertise is Vietnamese literature, and he was in Boston to attend a conference on America's multilingual literatures, so his encounter in the library is not quite the chance event that it first seems. Nevertheless, he uses it to imply that for most Americans such a collection would be surprising — that few would consider Vietnamese-language works to be American literature — and to make the claim that 'Vietnamese-language literature in the United States is a great untold story' (322). A similar claim could be made with regard to literature in Asian languages in Australia. How many Australians would be aware of the number of literary works written in Vietnamese in their country? Are English-language readers at Wollongong City Library aware of the numerous works in Vietnamese on their library's shelves? Would they think of such works as Australian literature? Transferring Duffy's claim of an 'untold story' to an Australian context, I would like to bring a part of Australia's Vietnamese writing into focus.¹

From the outset I need to qualify my expertise in this area by acknowledging that I neither speak nor read Vietnamese. Yet as a researcher with the AustLit database responsible for the documentation of Australia's multilingual literatures, I am aware of the vibrant and diverse literature produced by a wide range of Vietnamese writing communities in cities across Australia. My awareness of writing in Vietnamese in Australia began at a Sydney Writers' Festival event held at Liverpool in Sydney's south-western suburbs in 2007. The event was attended by a sizeable audience, drawn from the Australian Vietnamese community as well as from the Lao and Philippine communities, as literary production from

all three groups was featured in the day's proceedings. As one of the editors of four recent anthologies of Southeast Asian diasporic writing, Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn detailed his involvement over more than two decades with Vietnamese-Australian writers who, following their migration to Australia, have continued to write in the language of their birth. At Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's talk, I heard for the first time of the literary magazines *Tap Hop* and *Việt*, and of the website *Tien Ve*, which I have since learned is the most significant platform for new Vietnamese writing not only in Australia, but globally across the Vietnamese diaspora.² In the weeks following this event, as I traced Vietnamese writing through Australian library catalogues and in particular the holdings of the Mitchell Library in Sydney, I also came across the magazine *Integration*, published over ten years in Bankstown, another suburb in Sydney's south-west. Carrying current affairs reporting and literary work, often in both English and Vietnamese, this magazine provides hundreds of narratives, both autobiographical and fictional, as well as poetry, allowing me some insight into the experiences of the Vietnamese-Australian communities. I contacted the magazine's editor, Xuan Duong, and he put me in touch with Boitran Huynh-Beattie, an art historian and researcher who has extensive contacts amongst the Vietnamese-Australian artistic and cultural communities. Crucially, as well, she has the linguistic skills necessary for the documentation of Vietnamese-Australian literary work that AustLit was then lacking. Thus, my access to and understanding of the wealth of Vietnamese writing in Australia has been made possible through Huynh-Beattie's ongoing work in documenting this literature for the database and making it available to the wider research communities of Australian literary studies. What follows is not a comprehensive survey or analysis of writing in Vietnamese in Australia, but rather a gesture towards a field of writing that awaits detailed critical readings and histories. In this present article I only hope to indicate something of this writing's presence in the Australian literary landscape.

Scholarly work in English on Vietnamese-Australian writing has only recently begun to appear, in a few scattered articles that mainly discuss writing produced in English. Hoa Pham and Scott Brook's article 'Generation V: The Search for Vietnamese Australia' (2009), for example, provides a survey of five Vietnamese-Australian writers and their works. With its focus, however, on writing in English by generation 1.5 writers — those who came to Australia at a young age and who mostly grew up speaking and writing English — the article does not include writing in Vietnamese. In their opening paragraph the authors refer to 'a large number of *tho* (poems) and *van* (prose/stories)' produced by the Vietnamese community in Australia for over thirty years, and they indicate that despite this substantial literary output, writing in Vietnamese remains "invisible" in mainstream Australian literary culture' (311).³ In another article, 'Vietnamese Return Narratives in Australian Public Culture' (2010), again co-authored by Scott Brook, this time with Caitlin Nunn, the works of two generation 1.5 Vietnamese-Australian writers are analysed in terms of 'return narratives' — that is, narratives

in which, following the Vietnamese government's policy of Đổi Mới and the easing of relations with Western countries, members of the Vietnamese diaspora return to visit Vietnam, either to reunite with family, or on business, or simply as tourists. One of the plays discussed, *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide* by Chi Vu has developed from a short story written in English into a bilingual dramatic work, with a Vietnamese translation subsequently published on the Tien Ve website. Few Vietnamese-Australian works make the journey in the other direction, however, with translation of Australian writing in Vietnamese into English a rare occurrence.⁴

This is what makes Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's translations of poetry by Uyên Nguyên, Nguyễn Tôn Hiệt, Trần Lộc Bình and Phan Quỳnh Trâm in this issue of *Kunapipi* so important. In recent years, Australian readers and viewers have had greater opportunity to encounter Vietnamese narratives and other forms of cultural production that circulate in English — with a growing number of autobiographies, anthologies, films, and exhibitions — but those many Vietnamese-Australian writers whose work has appeared in *Dân Việt* or *Việt Luận*, two Sydney-based Vietnamese-language newspapers, or whose work is self-published and sold in bookshops in Cabramatta or Liverpool, remain unknown outside the Vietnamese-Australian community.⁵ Amongst all forms of cultural expression, poetry is particularly valued by Vietnamese readers. Californian-based Vietnamese author Võ Phiến writes: 'Poetry and prose, especially poetry, constitute the forte of the Vietnamese people' (108). In his essay on the Vietnamese language and its maintenance amongst the communities of the Vietnamese diaspora, Võ Phiến underscores the concreteness of both the language and its poetry. By this he means its connection to orality or, as John Schafer remarks, its rootedness in 'the daily language of ordinary people' (283). Võ Phiến writes: 'In Vietnam, there is no need to be literate to compose a poem; one can be the worst kind of illiterate and a poet. Poetry is spreading everywhere, in the narrowest of alleys, and obviously it is flooding the print medium' (108). He goes on to write of the importance of encountering poetry in newspapers, of its accessibility, and of the sense of connectedness, of community, that daily engagement with such poetry provides its readers. In Australia, poetry in Vietnamese continues to circulate readily, with new poems appearing in almost each weekly edition of *Việt Luận*.

Uyên Nguyên's poetry sequence 'Hai biến khúc từ mục kết bạn và nhắn tin' (Two Variations on the Columns 'Making Friends' and 'Short Messages') finds its inspiration and its raw material in both Vietnamese oral narrative and literature and the daily language of ordinary people. The first of these variations, 'Giáng Kiều', draws upon the traditional Vietnamese story of a young man who falls in love with a woman in a portrait, only to find that the woman is a fairy, able to move between her world of the painting and that of the young man who loves her. The story uses the common folk motif of the fairy bride, in some cultures the swan maiden, who leaves her world above to live with her lover in this world below. The second variation 'Reading Kieu' refers to the nineteenth-century epic

poem *The Tale of Kieu*, a well-known work of Vietnamese literature, by Nguyễn Du. American-Vietnamese scholar Huỳnh Sanh Thông, in the introduction to his translation and bilingual edition of *The Tale of Kieu*, comments that for the Vietnamese who left their homeland following the end of the war in 1975, this epic poem has particular resonance, as it is a story of a young woman who, in order to ransom her father from false imprisonment, sells herself and subsequently experiences exile, betrayal and years of trial and hardship. Huỳnh Sanh Thông claims that for diasporic Vietnamese, *The Tale of Kieu* reads as an account of their own travails. 'They know most of its lines by heart, and when they recite them out loud, they speak their mother tongue at its finest. To the extent that the poem implies something at the very core of Vietnamese experience, it addresses them intimately as victims, as refugees, as survivors' (xl).

Both poems in Uyên Nguyên's sequence speak to the experience of displacement and loss shared by so many of his readers amongst the Vietnamese communities in Australia. The first is a meditation upon an imagined return to a home long left behind. Each stanza opens with a variation upon the line 'Tomorrow when I come back to the old alleys'. Through successive stanzas, the narrator finds that change has overtaken everything once known and that now 'the ancient fiddles / sing to the folds / of a lost life'. The poet knows that 'Tomorrow / when I come back to the old cities / I won't be able to recognise / Hanoi / Saigon'. He then realises: 'perhaps when I stop searching / I will / meet / again / the old acquaintances' and this leads him to conclude: 'Tomorrow / when I come back to my home town / I will burn all the books / draw a new portrait / feel a reminiscent fragrance from remote paths'. He knows that the paths of the past may provide one with direction only when one lets go of the words and images that attempt, but fail, to fix and hold that past. With the final stanza's reference to 'a fairy / stepping down to earth' the reader is returned to the story of Giáng Kiều and of her separation from home as she steps down from the painting. The second variation works upon the repeated lines 'Who are you' and 'Where are you from', addressing one who has 'emigrated / from your rural or suburban home' and is now a 'lonely walker'. The line 'a flower straying into the brothel' reminds readers of the situation of Kieu, forced by circumstance into prostitution and exile. And yet, although the poem is filled with references to exile, it ends with the claim that poetry and music do not depend upon returning one's heart to the homeland. 'Poetry and music can blossom within / a talented man who sits alone under the misty moon'.

Although my reading is obviously limited to the English translation of the sequence, my inkling of the poems' beauty and wonder results from knowing that the sequence has been constructed entirely from 'found' or 'recovered' words taken from a single page of classified ads appearing in a Vietnamese-language newspaper from Sydney. The 'Making Friends' and 'Short Messages' of the sequence's title refer to the Personal Columns and Classified Ads of *Dân Việt*, appearing on the week of the 7th of July 1998.⁶ The poetry sequence then is

more than an exercise in nostalgia by way of literary allusion. Uyên's poems situate the work of memory and engagement with the past in the context of the everyday and literally using 'the daily language of ordinary people'. Readers of the literary journal *Việt*, where Uyên's poems first appeared, can move from his verses to the page of advertisements from *Dân Việt* which is reproduced next to them. The poems seem, in one sense, a performance of quite magical transformation, their appearance from the classified ads as astounding as the fairy Giáng Kiều stepping out of the painting. They may also demonstrate, however, Võ Phiến's contention that, for readers of Vietnamese, the space of the everyday, encountered in newspapers, and the other world of poetry are not that far apart; and that engaging creatively with language — one's first language — is, for many Vietnamese migrants who grew up and were educated in Vietnam, an integral aspect of maintaining cultural identity.⁷

Moving to another quite remarkable publication, Trần Đình Lưỡng's book of poetry *Hải Đảo* (2005) illustrates the complexities that arise when one considers Vietnamese literary work written in Australia from the perspective of national literatures. Following the defeat of the South Vietnamese government in 1975, Trần Đình Lưỡng escaped by boat with his wife and daughter, eventually settling in Australia. His first poems were published in the magazine *Integration* in the 1990s, some in bilingual format, others in Vietnamese only. He then had a number of poems in Vietnamese appear in several issues of *Việt*. In recent years he has been able to travel back to Vietnam and in 2005 he published *Hải Đảo* in Ho Chi Minh City. The book comprises twenty-two poems and a song, accompanied by an introductory essay by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn. Of these twenty-two poems, fifteen are in Vietnamese-only; seven are in bilingual format. The setting and content of the poems moves between Vietnam and Australia, as the title of one of the Vietnamese poems, 'Từ sông Tiền Đường đến Jindabyne Lake' (From Tiền Đường River to Jindabyne Lake), indicates. One of the bilingual poems 'Sydney, mùa xuân hoa tím' or 'Sydney in the Purple Spring' opens with the lines 'Have you come back, Jacaranda? / The purple haired Giang Kieu! / The city in sunset has been transformed with your colour. / Now that you have stepped out of the painting (16). The poem goes on to reflect on the experience of displacement and the 'sorrowful memories' of the poet since leaving his home country. Having lived in Sydney for seven years, he says, he has 'only the love of this lone flower', and the poem ends with the line 'Jacaranda, / You are disappearing in the sky with a final murmur: / The violet' (17).

Again, my access to and appreciation of this work is limited by my monolingual reading but what I find intriguing here is not only the evocation of the Giáng Kiều story transposed to a Sydney setting, but also the question of how this book fits into or contests current assumptions of what constitutes Australian literature. Although over the past three decades multicultural writing — works by writers of non-Anglo-Celtic background — has gained acceptance and attracted

substantial scholarship as an integral part of the nation's literature, reflecting the histories of migration and the diverse cultural heritages of Australia's population, multicultural writing in languages other than English remain mostly unnoticed. Australian literary studies continues to manifest what Michael Clyne has referred to as Australia's 'monolingual mindset' (21), or what J.J. Smolicz has more harshly characterised as 'monolingual myopia' (250), in its ongoing neglect of literature produced in Australia in languages other than English. What else can one conclude when more than twenty years of Vietnamese literary endeavour from dozens of writers living in Sydney, Melbourne, and across other Australian cities, whose work circulates and is critiqued internationally amongst the Vietnamese diaspora, remains practically unknown to Australian literature researchers? Uyên Nguyễn's work has been included in a major two volume anthology from the United States, *Hai Mươi Năm Văn Học Việt Nam Hải Ngoại 1975–1995* (1995), whose title translates as Twenty Years of Vietnamese Literature in the Diaspora 1975–1995. Trần Đình Luồng has had work published in the American literary journal *Hợp Lưu*, as have a number of other Vietnamese-Australian writers. Other Vietnamese-Australian writers have had novels and collections of short stories published by Lang Van, a literary magazine and publishing company in Toronto, Canada. And recently Trần Đình Luồng and other Vietnamese-Australian writers are able to publish in Vietnam while living in Australia. Does this writing only enter Australian literature when it is translated? It seems that this is the case, and if so, Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn's translations in this issue are an important step towards the inclusion of this significant field of writing amongst Australian literary work.

Vietnamese writing in Australia is not alone in this regard. The Lao and Philippine writing communities profiled at the literary event in Liverpool mentioned at the beginning of this article comprise but two more Southeast Asian writing communities active in Australia over a substantial number of years, and whose work circulates in ways yet to be documented by Australian literary infrastructure, and certainly yet to be included in studies of contemporary Australian writing. The editor of an anthology of Philippine-Australian writing, Jose Wendell Capili, writes in his essay 'Southeast Asian Diaspora Writers in Australia and the Consequence of Community-Based Initiatives', '[q]uite often, literary cultures across Australia will not appreciate works by community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers'. Yet, Capili maintains, 'community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers continue to persist in Australia' (8), and he goes on to argue:

Many of those who are living in non-Anglo-Celtic and non-European communities all over Australia are also Australians... The creative works of community-based Southeast Asian diaspora writers in Australia allowed these writers to express their identity while recording the specificities of their communities' respective narrative of migrations. There may be occasional grievances in these writings. But these should also be negotiated as integral manifestations of what needs to be done in any society to move forward. (18)

Australian literature is as multilingual as the society from which it is generated. Australian literary studies needs to be more attentive, and more receptive, to the enormous varieties of literary work that have been, and continue to be, produced in languages other than English, including the work in Vietnamese canvassed in this brief article. When Nguyễn Tôn Hiết writes in ‘Speech of a Poet’ that he does not ask his audience to understand, that he only requests that they listen to his voice, he is in fact proposing a basic starting point from which those with an interest or investment in Australian literature and its study might begin to acknowledge the presence of other literatures, in other languages, from Vietnam, from Southeast Asia, or from elsewhere, as they contribute to the literary life of Australians of many heritages.

NOTES

- ¹ This article has developed from a paper co-authored with Wenche Ommundsen and first presented at ‘Cultures of Sustainability; Sustainability of Cultures’ an international workshop held at the University of British Columbia in July 2010, and is based on research undertaken for the AustLit database by the author and Boitran Huynh-Beattie. I am indebted to Boitran Huynh-Beattie for her linguistic and cultural expertise, and her commitment to the documentation of Vietnamese-Australian literary works.
- ² See Hoàng, 2007.
- ³ Quotations follow the original text, in which diacritics are not used. With diacritics, tho and van would be *thở* and *văn*.
- ⁴ Quỳnh-Du has translated into English a novel and a collection of short stories by Pham Thi Hoai, a Vietnamese writer who lives in Germany. It should be noted that these are not works by an Australian-based author, though the translator is Australian. Quỳnh-Du is also the translator into Vietnamese of Chi Vu’s *Vietnam: A Psychic Guide*.
- ⁵ For examples of Vietnamese narratives circulating in Australia in recent years see Hoàng, Ngọc-Tuấn, 2004; Huynh, Kim, 2007; Nguyen, Pauline, 2007; Huynh-Beattie, Boitran, 2009; Do, Khoa, 2009; Do, Anh, 2010, Cole, Catherine, 2010.
- ⁶ The sequence is reproduced on the *Tien Ve* website, along with an image of the classified ads page from which the words were taken. See <http://www.tienve.org/home/viet/viewVietJournals.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=208>
- ⁷ This is not the situation, of course, for those Vietnamese-Australians identified as Generation 1.5 — those who arrived in Australia at a young age and grew up with English as a first language. See, for example, Hoa Van Stone’s autobiography *Heart of Stone* (2007), in which he writes of his experience of returning to Vietnam as an adult and not speaking the language.

WORKS CITED

- Brook, Scott and Caitlin Nunn 2010, ‘Vietnamese Return Narratives in Australian Public Culture’, *Amerasian Journal*, 36.2, pp. 17–32.
- Capili, Jose Wendell 2007, ‘Southeast Asian Diaspora Writers in Australia and the Consequence of Community-Based Initiatives’, *From the Editors: Migrant Communities and Emerging Australian Literature*, ed. Jose Wendell Capili, Casula Powerhouse, Liverpool, pp. 7–19.

- Capili, Jose Wendell and John Cheeseman (eds) 2008, *Salu-Salo: In Conversation with Filipinos: An Anthology of Philippine-Australian Writings*, Casula Powerhouse and Blacktown Arts Centre, Casula.
- Clyne, Michael 2005, *Australia's Language Potential*, UNSW Press, Sydney.
- Cole, Catherine (ed.) 2010, *The Perfume River: An Anthology of Writing from Vietnam*, UWA Publishing, Crawley, WA.
- Do, Anh 2010, *The Happiest Refugee: The Extraordinary True Story of a Boy's Journey from Starvation at Sea to Becoming One of Australia's Best-Loved Comedians*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest.
- Do, Khoa 2009, *Mother Fish*, Titan View, Sydney.
- Duffy, Dan 2002, 'Beyond the National Tradition: Thuong Vuong-Riddick's *Two Shores/Deux Rives*', *American Babel: Literatures of the United States from Abnaki to Zuni*, ed. Marc Shell, Harvard UP, Cambridge, pp. 322–39.
- Hoàng, Ngọc-Tuấn 2007, 'My Long Journey with New and Emerging Vietnamese-Australian Writers', *From the Editors: Migrant Communities and Emerging Australian Literature*, ed. Jose Wendell Capili, Casula Powerhouse, Liverpool, pp. 28–37.
- Hoàng, Ngọc-Tuấn (ed.) 2004, *Cầu Nói: The Bridge: Anthology of Vietnamese Australian Writing*, Casula Powerhouse Research Centre, Liverpool.
- Huynh, Kim 2007, *Where the Sea Takes Us*, Fourth Estate, Sydney.
- Huynh-Beattie, Boitran (ed.) 2009, *Nam Bang!* Casula Powerhouse, Casula.
- Nguyễn Du 1983, *The Tale of Kieu: A Bilingual Edition of Truyen Kieu*, trans. Huỳnh Sanh Thông, Yale UP, New Haven.
- Nguyen, Pauline 2007, *Secrets of the Red Lantern: Stories and Vietnamese Recipes from the Heart*, Murdoch Books, Sydney.
- Pham, Hoa and Scott Brook 2009, 'Generation V: The Search for Vietnamese Australia', *Reading Down Under: Australian Literary Studies Reader*, ed. Amit Sarwal and Reema Sarwal, SSS Publications, New Delhi, pp. 311–320.
- Pham Thi Hoai 2006, *Sunday Menu: Selected Stories of Pham Thi Hoai*, trans. Tôn-thất Quỳnh-Du, Pandanus Books, Canberra.
- 1997, *The Crystal Messenger*, trans. Tôn-thất Quỳnh-Du, Hyland House, South Melbourne.
- Schafer, John C. 2006, *Vỡ Phấn and the Sadness of Exile*, Southeast Asia Publications, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb.
- Smolicz, J.J. 1994, 'Australia's Language Policies and Minority Rights: A Core Value Perspective', *Linguistic Human Rights: Overcoming Linguistic Discrimination*, ed. Tove Skutnabb-Kangas, Robert Phillipson, in collaboration with Mart Rannut, Mouton de Gruyter, Berlin & New York, pp. 235–52.
- Stone, Hoa Van 2007, *Heart of Stone: My Story*, House & Company of Grace, Glenelg.

Tien Ve <http://www.tienve.org/>

Trần, Đình Lương 2005, *Hải Đảo*, Văn Nghệ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, Ho Chi Minh City.

Uyên Nguyên 1999, 'Hai biến khúc từ mục kết bạn và nhắn tin', *Việt*, 3, pp. 195–99, online, <http://www.tienve.org/home/viet/viewVietJournals.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=208>

Võ Phiến 1994, 'The Vietnamese Language and People Abroad', *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, trans. Hoai An, ed. Nguyen Xuan Thu, Vietnamese Language and Cultural Publications, Melbourne, pp. 94–109.

Vu Chi 2001, 'Vietnam: A Psychic Guide', *Meanjin*, 60.1, pp. 34–47. [Adapted for stage and first performed at Footscray Community Arts Centre, 2001.]

——— 2003, 'Việt Nam: sách hướng dẫn tâm linh', Tien Ve, trans. Tôn-thất Quỳnh-Du, online, <http://www.tienve.org/home/literature/viewLiterature.do?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=880>

Uyên Nguyên

TWO VARIATIONS ON THE COLUMNS ‘MAKING FRIENDS’ AND ‘SHORT MESSAGES’

1. GIANG KIEU¹

Tomorrow when I come back to the old alleys
 who still stays there
 over the pages of the letters unfolded throughout an ageless life
 by the roots of the *hanh duong*²
 under the motionless moon
 I ask
 since the time of Giang Kieu
 the plantation mansion has been abandoned in coldness
 the moon on the west citadel has gone astray to another town
 the flowers have forgotten their age
 the grassland has been covered in mist
 the west lake has become muddy
 the autumn waves
 dark
 cold

Tomorrow when I come back to the old alleys
 I seemingly hear
 the ancient fiddles
 sing to the folds
 of a lost life
 the tunes wander along rows of chrysanthemums

Tomorrow
 when I stray into the town of
 Jiang-dong
 I will not see the two Kieu sisters³
 where have they gone
 one early dawn
 they have left their lutes on the southern fields

Tomorrow
 when I come back to the old cities
 I won't be able to recognise
 Hanoi
 Saigon

my karma⁴ will offer me
an incense bowl in the temple
cold
after a long journey

Tomorrow when I come back to the old cities
in a moonlit alley
I will look for
the ageless fragrance
I will read the books
in the books I will see
the pretty silhouettes of Kieu

Tomorrow when I stray into another town
I will nurse the flowers
beholding sunset on the other side of the misty riverbank
wondering about
separation and reunion
perhaps when I stop searching
I will
meet
again
the old acquaintances

Tomorrow
when I come back to my home town
I will burn all the books
draw a new portrait
feel a reminiscent fragrance
from remote paths

Coming back
tomorrow
to the old alleys
someone will see
a fairy
stepping down to earth

(12/08/98)

2. READING KIEU⁵

Who are you
why reliving the sunsets
on another long river
embarking on an unintentional
homecoming
you
the lonely walker
with your luggage for the rest of your life
after a journey under the widowed moon
have strayed into unknown destination
one early dawn you have emigrated
from your rural or suburban home

Who are you
since a certain autumn
you have stayed in a motionless misty field
without knowing
flowers have stopped falling on your front porch

Where have you come from
elegant city of Chang'an
or Kham Thien town in Hanoi
a flower straying into the brothel
destiny of a songstress
with fiddles and moon and plum blossom for your expression
Where is the Qiantang Jiang⁶
separation and reunion
like waves on the river

Who are you
morning dew
seasons of flowers
endless loneliness
an empty hundred years
a humble cedar tree

Where are you from
are you from the far frontier beyond the river
with standing posture of an angel
but in your youthful age

nidàna⁷

hearts of beautiful women

karma

where are you

Who are you

Where are you from

words

It was said

Who are you

why must you

Poetry and music can blossom within
a talented man who sits alone under the misty moon

(17/08/98)

(translated from Vietnamese by Hoàng Ngọc-Tuấn)

NOTES

- ¹ Giáng Kiều is a fairy character in the Vietnamese ancient tale *Bích Câu Kỳ Ngộ* (*The Extraordinary Meeting at Bích Câu*). The young scholar Tú Uyên fell desperately in love with a beautiful young woman, and he bought a painting of a fairy that looked exactly like her. Days and nights he adored the painting as if it were a real human being. One day, the fairy stepped out from the picture and returned his love.
- ² *hạnh đường*: this word has a double meaning: 1/ a type of tree that has fragrant flowers; 2/ a house where people come to nurture their morality.
- ³ The two Kiều sisters are Thuý Kiều and Thuý Vân in the Vietnamese epic poem *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kiều*) written by Nguyễn Du (1766–1820). *Truyện Kiều* is widely regarded as the most significant work of Vietnamese literature. The poem recounts the life, trials and tribulations of Thuý Kiều, a beautiful and gifted young woman, who has to sacrifice herself to save her father and younger brother from prison. She sells herself into marriage with a middle-aged rich man, not knowing that he is a procurer, and is forced into prostitution. After 15 years in prostitution, she escapes and attempts suicide by drowning herself in a turbulent river but is saved by a nun, and is eventually reunited with her family. However, it in a twist of irony she discovers that her lover has married her sister.
- ⁴ *karma*: The total effect of a person's actions and conduct during the successive phases of the person's existence, regarded as determining the person's destiny.
- ⁵ *The Tale of Kiều*. See footnote 3.
- ⁶ A great river in Hang-chow (China) famous for its monstrous tidal bore. Thuý Kiều jumped into this river to attempt suicide.
- ⁷ *nidāna*: A contributory cause or condition. It is the term used for each of the twelve links that constitute the chain of Dependent Origination (*pratitya-samutpada*).

HAI BIÊN KHÚC TỪ MỤC KẾT BẠN VÀ NHẢN TIN

1. GIÁNG KIỀU

Mai về hẻm phố
Mai về hẻm phố
trang thư mở một đời không tuổi
gốc hạnh đường
trắng đứng
hỏi
từ Giáng Kiều hoang
lạnh thảo trang
thành Tây trắng lạc phố
hoa biết tuổi về đâu
thảo điền sương
tây hồ lịch lịch
mộng
lãnh
thu ba

Mai về hẻm phố
chùng nghe
hồ nhị
những nếp gấp phản đời
đã mất
đàn đi bước hoàng hoa

Mai
về lạc phố
Giang Đông không gặp
Nhị Kiều đâu
l sớm
đàn Quyên ở lại đồng Nam

Mai
về phố thị
không hay
Hà Nội
Sài Gòn
bát hương đèn thần xá
ngãi duyên đưa
lạnh
l trở đường

Mai về phố thị
một hẻm trắng
tìm
hương không tuổi
độc thư
thư trung hữu nữ
về trắng duyên những dáng Kiều

Mai về lạc phố
ương hoa
hoàng hôn biên ngoại trường giang sương
biết đâu
ly hợp
những ngày không
tìm
gặp
lại
lừa đời quen
thôi đã

Mai
về hợp phố
sẽ phản thư
chân dung vừa mới
đường xa đâu đó
hương ba

Ai về
mai
hẻm phố
tiên
1 bước xuống đời

(12/08/98)

2. ĐỘC KIỀU

Người là ai
sao sống lại những hoàng hôn
l trường giang khác
cuộc hồi hương
không định trước
nào ai
người độc bộ
hành trang cho phần đời còn lại
sau đường trắng goá phố
đã về đâu bước lạc
đồng nội thị thành
l sớm thiên cư

Người là ai
từ độ thu nào
ở lại đồng sương đứng
tiền đình hoa lạc
tận
không hay

Người từ đâu
Trường An nhả phố
Hà Nội Khâm Thiên
hoa lạc thanh lâu
nghịch đàn kỹ nữ
nào nhị nào hồ nào trắng nào tuyết mai tâm sự
Tiền Đường đâu
ly hợp
giang ba

Người là ai
sớm mai sương
những thì hoa
cô tận
trăm năm không
gốc thành tùng

Người từ đâu
biên đình giang ngoại
dáng đứng thiên thần
tuổi bình minh

một bước đổi đời
sao định số hàng thần

duyên

lòng mỹ nữ

nghiệp

đâu đường thiên lý đâu bước giang hồ đâu chí lớn tứ thiên tài tuần

người đâu

thôi

sao lạc

đứng âm đàn

Người là ai

bước đường cùng

trường thương lạc bộ

chiếu giường đâu

phẳng nếp đời trang

hoa đăng

thôi đã

Người từ đâu

thảo trang trắng nhả nhạc

thư lâu độc lạc

không mình đại trường thiên

từ

tâm

hành tâm sự

tài

định than

thì

số

nghe đâu

nghiệp lớn đề đời

không phải vị than

sao chia chánh phụ

nào đâu Lê

nào đâu Nguyễn

chỉ còn lại con người

và bước tiến về hướng bình minh

Người là ai

sao phải

đưa hùng tâm về địa các

đón đại lạc lại trường an

đâu đến ba trăm năm

thì đàn

mông

lãnh
tài hoa 1 chiều trắng sương

(17/08/98)

The source of materials for ‘Two Variations on the Columns “Making Friends” and “Short Messages”’ is a page cut from the *Dân Việt* newspaper, Thursday, 23/07/1998, that contains the columns ‘Making Friends’ and ‘Short Messages’.

DOLORES HERRERO

Merlinda Bobis's *Banana Heart Summer*: Recipes to Work through Trauma and Appease the Human Heart's Everlasting Hunger¹

Some books are to be tasted, others to
be swallowed, some few to be
chewed and digested.
(Francis Bacon, 'Of Studies')

Merlinda Bobis was born in the Philippines but went to Australia in 1991. *Banana Heart Summer*, the novel she published in 2005, is a truly original piece, very different from her previous works. What at first seems to be a collection of exotic recipes (most of its chapters have titles such as 'Shredded heart in coconut milk', 'Tomato lemon carp with hibiscus', and 'Clear clam soup', to give but three examples), turns out to be a touching, funny and elegiac story. Namely, the fictive autobiographical account of the summer in which Nenita, a poor twelve-year-old Filipina girl, decides to quit school and employ herself as a maid and cook in order to desperately try to appease her family's hunger and, what is even more important, to win her violent mother's love.

'Rice cooked too soon' (68): that is the joke that some people use to refer to her mother's early unwanted pregnancy. Nenita's mother's subsequent marriage to her lower-class father 'collapsed the social order beyond restoration' (71) and scandalised her rich family ('Buena familia' [65]), who accused her of being 'a gallivanting whore' (116), and 'did not wish to know about their kin who ran away with a mason during her first year at high school' (71). Nenita cannot help interiorising what people say about her, that she is responsible for her mother's frustration and unhappiness and, what is even worse, that her mother has never loved her.

Mother never got over it. She fell pregnant and fell out of her family's favour. I suspect she never wanted the pregnancy, but my earnest young father knew that a baby would make sure she couldn't leave him, and she never forgave him or me. Her shame, her sorrow. (117)

Nenita takes after her father, but does not have her mother's graces. This explains why she always feels inferior and guilty in debt to her 'pristine' mother (107), and the reason why she longs to become her mother's 'best girl' at all costs

(108): 'I was my mother's shame and sorrow. I had stolen so much of her dignity, she often said. I needed to compensate for my crime' (107). This is her own private and unconfessable sin, the trauma she will always have to live with. So intense and incomprehensible has been her suffering that she feels she must write about that summer in order to write herself into a worthwhile existence. Despite Nenita's frequent claims that she is strong enough to cope with everything, to the point that 'nothing could ever hurt [her] enough to exhaust [her]' (41), it will take her twenty-eight years to have the courage to narrate her story. At forty and from Oregon, a city in a country so far away from her own, Nenita is finally able to explicitly narrate to us, her readers, what she experienced and underwent during that crucial summer: 'I will take you through a tour of our street and I will tell you its stories. Ay, my street of wishful sweets and spices' (3-4).

Her survival has become a form of autobiography, and she directly addresses the reader, who becomes deeply involved in her account and can therefore identify with her heroic plight. An approach such as this constitutes the main difference between men's and women's autobiographies, according to critics like Shoshana Felman: autobiographies written by men tend to have a celebratory tone that is often absent in autobiographies written by women.

The proclivity of men toward embellishing their autobiographies results in the projection of a self-image of confidence, no matter what difficulties they may have encountered. This is contrary to the self-image projected in women's autobiographies. What their life stories reveal is a self-consciousness and a need to sift through their lives for explanation and understanding. The autobiographical intention is often powered by the motive to convince readers of their self-worth, to clarify, to affirm, and to authenticate their self-image. (qtd in Jelinek 15)

Felman goes on to argue that a significant difference between men's and women's writing is that pain is very often present in female autobiographies, which consequently become the narration and unearthing of a trauma that has for long been repressed: 'Unlike men, who write autobiographies from memory, women's autobiography is what their memory cannot contain — or hold together as a whole, although their writing inadvertently writes it' (15). This painful experience of writing and re-membering the humiliations of the past, especially those of being an unwanted daughter, is one of the fundamental aims of Nenita's bittersweet autobiographical account, in which food becomes its main structural link. After all, autobiographical writing is, among other things, about experiencing-articulating, which could be easily extrapolated to ingesting-expelling. As *Banana Heart Summer* seems to hint, in the case of many women like Nenita, pain from trauma is physicalised in its articulation, in the writing. Hence the use of so many food and eating/ ingesting metaphors in the novel, and the ambivalent symbolism that they can often have. To give but one example, in the chapter 'Lengua para diablo', the act of cannibalism, and of being eaten results in Nenita being the fortunate 'inside girl', the girl in the rich man's stomach who would thus be able

to tell 'the true nature of sated affluence', because '[i]n his stomach, [she] would be inducted to secrets' (18), the secrets of abundance and plenty. On the other hand, this image inevitable brings to mind that of Nenita as an unwanted foetus in her mother's womb, but in this case the implications are of a very different nature, because in her mother's womb she would be inducted to *the* secret: the truth that she was unwanted.

Eating is a fundamental human activity, since it is both necessary for survival and inextricably linked with social function. Eating practices are essential to self-identity, and are instrumental in defining family, class, even ethnic identity,² and in understanding human society and its relationship with the world. As Mikhail Bakhtin stated when discussing Rabelais's irreverent novel, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, because appetite is located in the viscera, '[t]he bowels study the world in order to conquer and subjugate it' (301). Themes related to food are therefore common among all types of writing since, as Evelyn J. Hinz maintains, 'eating and drinking in themselves constitute an elaborate and complex sign language which metonymically brackets and informs all aspects of discourse and human experience' (v). The relationship between food and literature, as Hinz goes on to argue (v–vi), can have multifarious implications: attitudes towards eating can affect the critical reception of a literary work and its interpretation; a focus on food may have an effect on the shape or narrative technique of a work; attitudes towards food may function as indices to mode or genre; the presence of food in a text inevitably situates that work in a specific cultural context; the question of metaphoricity becomes especially crucial in texts dealing with eating habits; food may function as a mediator between Nature and Culture, author and reader, world and text. Moreover, it is a fact that many female writers have used food and its related concerns as an emblem of feminine identity and domesticity. *Banana Heart Summer* is an exceptional illustration of all the aforementioned aspects.

However, while plot in literature most often focuses on the vicissitudes of human relationships, on love, betrayal, conquest, loss, rather than food, that is, while meals often merely provide the framework for events, in the case of Bobis's novel food becomes the main event upon which everything hinges and coheres, the almighty metaphor that grants Nenita the centrality and healing powers that she longs to have. Unlike well-known feminist texts in which the kitchen symbolises the marginalisation and oppression of women, in *Banana Heart Summer* the kitchen becomes, not only a woman's domain, that is, the ultimate realm for female survival, celebration, creativity and solidarity, but also a vehicle for knowing secret recipes, the inside stories. The kitchen could thus be related to 'the inside', like the gut, since it is home to our most basic human preoccupations.³ Furthermore, Nenita's autobiographical account using stories, recipes and reminiscences, also helps to portray the migrant/transcultural writer as an exile from both Filipino and Western cultures. Her attempts to enunciate a self that is both enduring and dynamic are mainly revealed in her passionate

concerns with food. As Merlinda Bobis argues, forty-year-old Nenita stands for the migrant writer who desperately tries to rarefy domestic food images from the first home, in order to make sense of her new condition, and to make sure that she does not forget old loyalties (2006 11). Eating is much more than a human activity necessary for survival, eating becomes, to quote Bobis's own words, 'a ritual of remembering ... a symbolic homecoming' (11). If, according to Herbert Read, a metaphor is 'the swift illumination of an equivalence' (25), then it can be argued that Filipino recipes and food, the banana heart being the ultimate embodiment of them all, migrate to America as precious metaphors. Food, mainly as embodied by the banana heart, does not only bring reminiscences of home. Food is the representation of dignified survival. Food is home and mother, Nenita's first home, Nenita's first heart. It is the banana heart, together with all the other food metaphors, that will allow the migrant writer to re-invent, not only her representation of food and eating, but also and more important, her representation of herself. As Bobis put it:

'Foodspeak' is doublespeak for the writer and the migrant. Both the literary and the domestic discourse are layered, ambivalent and often shifting between exposure and subterfuge — a state evoked by the image of the banana heart, the 'petticoated flirt' that reveals and hides itself in many velveteen folds. (2006 11)

Food metaphors allow Nenita, a Filipina domestic helper in America, to tell her own story, and thus define and dignify herself in the host culture, an experience shared by many other Filipina migrants.⁴ Almost every chapter in the novel is a Filipino dish that becomes a metaphor for life and survival. To give but some examples, because the whole list would be never-ending: the *palitaw* (a rice cake) is remembered as 'floating faith'; the *acharra* (pickled green papayas) teaches the art of preserving dignity and self-respect; the *halo-halo* (an iced mixture of sweets) is a mix-mix of life's comforting moments; the *turon* (deep-dried sugar banana and jackfruit) sounds and smells like happiness; the tomato lemon carp with hibiscus, the clear clam soup, and the stillborn banana fritters stand for dignity in the face of poverty and helplessness; the bitter melon graced with eggs represents the capacity to live a meaningful life in spite of marginality and isolation; the *biniribid* (a rice snack) encapsulates endurance and resilience; the *pinuso* (heart-shaped rice and coconut cake) stands for achievement and completion; the *igado* (liver dish) is a magic remedy to purge spleen; the food game of *piko-piko* points to the comforting power of fantasy; the *dinuguan* (blood stew) to the futility of greed and corruption; and the *peccadillo* (a fish dish) to the power of unconfessable sexual desire.

Why so many recipes? What does this excessive display of dishes stand for? As I see it, it is not a question of 'pandering to the West's love for "exotic morsels"' (Bobis 2006 16), nor is it a mere attempt to imitate and denounce the western practice that many critics have labelled as 'commodification of the exotic'.⁵ Food metaphors play a rather more complex and ambivalent role in the novel. To quote

Bobis's words again, 'food evokes more than good things ... food also evokes the lack of it. It is bound with hunger' (2006 15). Since in the novel food is home and mother food at once symbolises the absolute presence and absence of both. As a migrant, Nenita misses her far-away home. As an unwanted child, she desperately tries to make up for her mother's lack of love for her and fill in this immense hole. In other words, Nenita will strive to work through this heart-breaking childhood trauma by becoming the most meticulous and altruistic cook, namely, 'the master of the ritual of appeasement, of making better, and ultimately of balance' (266). Consequently, cooking becomes the main defence mechanism that Nenita uses to overcome the anxiety that her sense of guilt and lack of self-esteem provoke.

As many psychoanalytical theorists have explained, following Freud's delineation of the nature of ego mechanisms of defence,⁶ defence mechanisms are psychological strategies used by the self to protect itself from anxiety, social sanctions or situations with which one cannot easily cope. Feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame often accompany the feeling of anxiety. The signalling function of anxiety is, therefore, a crucial one, biologically adapted to warn the organism of danger or a threat to its mental balance. Anxiety is felt as an increase in bodily or mental tension, and the signal that the organism receives leads it to take defensive action towards the perceived danger. Defence mechanisms work by distorting the unconscious impulses into acceptable forms, or by unconscious blockage of these impulses. The list of particular defence mechanisms is huge, and there is no theoretical consensus as regards their number. Different theorists have produced different categorisations and conceptualisations of defence mechanisms.⁷ For the purpose of this analysis, however, I will employ George Eman Vaillant's theories (1977 and 1992), since they have been some of the most thoroughly elaborated and influential. Vaillant classified defence mechanisms according to four different levels of psychological development: level I — psychotic defences (psychotic denial, delusional projection); level II — immature defences (fantasy, projection, passive aggression, acting out); level III — neurotic defences (intellectualization, reaction formation, dissociation, displacement, repression); and level IV — mature defences (anticipation, altruism, sublimation, suppression, humour, identification, introjection).

It is my contention that forty-year-old Nenita has managed to become an emotionally healthy and mature adult by making use of mature (level IV) defence mechanisms. They had their origins in childhood, and were adapted through the years so that she managed to integrate conflicting emotions and thoughts (the heart and the spleen, love and anger), and as a result optimise success in life and relationships. Vaillant describes the mature defence mechanism of anticipation as the 'realistic anticipation of or planning for future inner discomfort', which includes, above all, 'goal-directed but overtly careful affective planning or worrying, anticipatory mourning and anxiety, and the conscious utilisation of "insight"' (1992 248). Following this argument, it can be said that Nenita is able

to anticipate the hunger and greater discomfort that the birth of her mother's seventh child is bound to bring about,⁸ and decides of her own free will to leave school and work as a maid and cook in the house of the Valenzuelas, one of the most well-off families in the neighbourhood. She chooses to become an earnest cook in order to feed, nourish and protect the others (her siblings, her poor friends Chi-Chi and Bebet, her mistress Violeta). To put it in Vaillant's terms, it is her altruism that brings her pleasure and personal satisfaction.⁹ 'Suddenly I felt big and grown-up, like the richest patron of all the empty stomachs in the world. Come all ye that hunger into my opulent abode' (165).

Moreover, she decides to channel her aggressive instincts towards difficult people and situations by focusing on their good side, that is, she makes use of the defence mechanism of sublimation, which will allow her to acknowledge but discard hurtful emotions by transforming them into positive ones. Following Vaillant's interpretation of similar cases, it could be argued that Nenita's feelings will be 'acknowledged, modified, and directed toward a relatively significant person or goal so that modest instinctual satisfaction results' (1992 248). Nenita is working for the Valenzuelas, who are very kind to her, but she cannot help missing her family because, in spite of all their negative aspects, Nenita says, she feels they are one and feel like one: 'In my family, we never hugged. We loved each other in our own way ... we did things together. We called out to God as one. We lay our bodies as one... Maybe we even dreamt as one' (74). And incomprehensible as it might be, she especially misses her mother. The reason for this can only be Nenita's decision to forget her mother's violence in order to sublimate her subsequent appeasing attitude, 'the change of heart that followed as [her mother] sat [her] down' after having beaten her: 'We hit you, because we love you' (106), she often said. Furthermore, Nenita clings to the very few happy memories that she has like when she and her brother Junior ate melon seeds with their mother, and magnifies these memories so as to keep herself happy: 'when it was just Junior and me, and Mother still laughed, she'd buy a packet and we'd sit around learning these tricks of eating, of companionship, of delight. Ay, she did it so well' (58). Nenita prefers sublimating her mother's good side: 'how she wanted all of us to eat and eat well, nagging each measly meal to multiply in her desperate hands' (119–20). It is this sublimation alone that will finally enable her to forgive her mother and write this conciliatory closing remark: 'How do I say that I have kissed those hands again and again in my dreams, and now I understand? And it is all right' (266).

Manolito Ching, Nenita's first love, also deserves some mention. Youth and hormones, together with an inevitable sense of social inferiority, lead her and her friend Chi-Chi to idealise what for a rather more detached eye would have merely been a rich spoilt boy. 'To us, the Chinese-Spanish *mestizo* still looked impeccably groomed, despite his sweaty bare chest. (122–23); 'None of us could move before the perfect teeth at the other side' (124). Nenita is free to regard

Manolito either as neighbour, friend or infatuation, and chooses to see him as the perfect combination of all three, simply because she needs to believe that he is the Prince Charming that will awaken her self-esteem. 'Manolito Ching: interceding neighbour, friend, crush. The nature of a thing (or person) is realised in the intent of its user' (128). To put it differently, the ultimate reason for this idealisation and sublimation is Nenita's hunger for love, the 'love at first sight between a mother and her firstborn ... imperative for the child's survival' (136) which she never enjoyed. The association that Nenita establishes between Manolito, her first love, and the figure of the mother is by no means accidental. She longs for a sentimental relationship that can make up for this primary lack and hunger '[f]oolishly I wondered about the boy who could kiss it better, my back, my eyes, kiss them all into forgetting' (244).

Nenita also manages to cope with reality by momentarily suppressing some uncomfortable thoughts and fears so as to be able to fully accept them eventually. According to Vaillant, the defence mechanism of suppression entails '[t]he capacity to hold all components of a conflict in mind and then postpone action, affective response, or ideational worrying' (1992: 247); that is, the sagacity to protect oneself by minimising and postponing acknowledged discomfort. Nenita knows she is poor (her family has a 'lengthened oesophagus' [6] due to their constant hunger) and lacks physical and social graces, and deep down in her heart is afraid of being rejected and humiliated by her rich neighbours and relations, most of whom look down on her and reject her company. Aunt Rosario's condescending attitude, Manolito's loud and cruel laughter when he sees her ragged knickers as she falls off the tree and, above all, Mrs Ching's accusation of theft, are clear evidence of this.

I should have known better. You don't mix with those above you, you keep to your kind. Culinary tricks, especially the more adventurous ones, never apply to human relationships. My salt with [their] sugar? Impossible. (41)

However, her ingrained sense of dignity helps her to minimise this inferiority complex so as to eventually cope with it. When Manolito, who some days before had sent her away from his kitchen without even asking for her name, asks Nenita to stay and play ball, she retorts: 'I'm busy' (126), thus making it clear that, no matter how attractive she may find him, she is not a toy he can take and discard at will.

Boy Hapon, the solitary neighbour about whom nobody in Remedios Street knows anything, has similar fears, although in his case anxiety is invested with a fairly pathological nature. He gave up being a member of the community a long time ago. 'Boy Hapon was and was not part of our street. He had never left his garden during the twelve years that I'd known or heard of him. I think he was afraid of us, and we of him' (80). Nenita is right: it is fear, fear of the unknown and unfamiliar — that is, of the other — that prevents them all from getting to know each other. One day, Nenita falls off a mango branch while trying to steal some green mangos for her mother, and ends up falling straight into Boy

Hapon's hands. Contrary to what Nenita might have expected, he is very kind to her, and begs her to ask him for whatever fruit she may need. Nenita now knows his secret: he is not a young boy, nor is he a monstrous figure. It is only a lonely and 'wrinkled man', with a 'lined, longish face with high cheekbones ... eyes that sloped upwards and ... very big ears' (109). Later on he will explain to her why he looks so different: he is a half-breed because his mother worked for the Japanese during the war. Actually, what the novel is suggesting, although in a very subtle way, is that his mother was 'a comfort woman'; that is, a Filipino woman who, like many others, was forced to prostitute herself and 'service' Japanese soldiers during the war.¹⁰ That explains why he looks Japanese and why the other neighbours do not like him (248–49). He never knew his mother. All he has from her is a faded picture that the nuns gave him as a child, and which he venerates on an altar he has arranged in a corner of the main room of his house.¹¹ He cooks, and reads Mills and Boon romances for his mother. This is his one and only activity, all he does in life. His nostalgia, loneliness and hunger for motherly love has led him to lock himself away from the neighbourhood and refuse all contact with the real, outside world. The similarities between Nenita and Boy Hapon are obvious. Both are half-breeds, albeit for different reasons: Boy Hapon's are racial (his mother was Filipina and his father Japanese), while Nenita's are social (her mother married a lower-class man). Both are mother-obsessed: they wish they had had a proper mother and they experience the same kind of fundamental void. Significantly, Nenita is the only person in the whole street with whom Boy Hapon eventually manages to communicate. However, whereas Boy Hapon has chosen to live in complete isolation, and worship the picture of a woman he never knew, Nenita has preferred to assume her condition, help and serve the others, and love her mother as the frustrated and unbalanced person that she is. Boy Hapon has decided to avoid interpersonal intimacy and use eccentricity to repel the others. Following Vaillant's theories again, it could be concluded that he relies on fantasy, an immature defence mechanism, so as 'to indulge in autistic retreat for the purpose of conflict resolution and gratification' (1992 244). On the contrary, Nenita has managed to face up to reality and look her fears and limitations in the face. Hers is the healthiest of attitudes.

Another defence mechanism that Nenita often uses in her narrative account is humour. As Vaillant claims when analysing similar cases (1992 247), it could be said that humour allows Nenita to express those ideas and feelings that are too unpleasant or terrible to talk about, and at the same time give pleasure to the others with her wit by referring to the serious or distressing in a humorous way, rather than disarming it. The thoughts remain just as distressing, but they are smoothed by the witticism. When Nana Dora asks Nenita how she sustained all those terrible bruises on her arms and legs, she simply answers: 'I fell from the sky' (96), refusing to tell Nana Dora how violently her mother had slapped, kicked and beaten her.¹² Being aware of the futility of praying to a God who

never listens, Nenita humorously concludes: 'Is it possible that the God the Father sometimes hears too late, because of too many crossed lines? ... [W]ho was taking [our earthly intentions] up to Him? What saint should we assign for this task that we couldn't even begin to grasp?' (62–63). When Nenita has to face up to her mother's resentment towards her, she chooses to find an exonerating explanation for this in the tale of the melon that grew pale. A melon farmer replies to a customer who complains that the melon he has just bought and dropped to the ground is not red inside: 'Believe me, Sir, I only grow the sweetest-reddest melons, but if it was you who had fallen, wouldn't you grow as pale?' (117). Her mother fell pregnant and fell out of her family's favour and, consequently, Nenita argues, '[s]he never got over the bruising. She remained pale even in the hottest summers' (116).

Nenita will also make use of the defence mechanism of identification by trying to model herself upon two different female figures, whose character and behaviour she respects and admires, although for different reasons. One of them will be her mistress, VV, Miss Violeta Valenzuela. She is not perfect: she commits one sin (she has a love affair with Mr Alano, a married man), and eventually pays the price (she gets pregnant and her lover lets her down). VV is generous, understanding, and cares about the suffering of the less privileged. Nenita adores her mistress because she understands her plight and tells Nenita's parents that she is going to work for her family.

I fell hopelessly in love with my new mistress then. Not with her beauty ... but with something I couldn't yet comprehend... I did not see an eighteen-year-old... I saw someone older, more composed, knowing, and the voice I heard was rich and rounded, like life that had come full circle. (100)

Moreover, VV keeps on telling Nenita that, contrary to what she thinks, the world is not her fault (234), and gives her the love and affection that she so badly needs: '[a]nd she loved me, she loved me. Even in her distraught moments, she always had a kind word for m... "You're not my maid, but my little friend"' (233). Similarly, Ralph, the American man who falls in love with VV and agrees to marry her and give her child a father, calls Nenita 'Miss' and says that she has a beautiful smile. Unlike Nenita's mother, who more often than not spat her name out at home, he calls her 'Neni-da', 'a name that would never sound angry' (182). Nenita all of a sudden realises that she is also attractive and, what is more important, that she deserves to be loved. Significantly enough, it is VV and Ralph who take Nenita with them to Oregon, far away from the suffocating street.

The other female character with whom Nenita unconsciously identifies is Nana Dora, the wise woman who appeases everybody's hunger in the street, and who keeps on feeding the fatherless twins long after all the other neighbours had forgotten about their sad destiny. Nana Dora and Nenita share the same passion for cooking, both of them are generous, are aware of the difficulty of '[finding] the balance between [their] love and anger' (263), and speak the same language:

'[w]e understood each other, we understood dignity' (96). Nana Dora cares about Nenita but respects her silence, and teaches her some very important lessons. There is nothing wrong in pleading, providing one never loses one's dignity: Nana Dora was abandoned by her husband, the Calcium Man, '[b]ecause her womb was as barren as soup without water and he so badly wanted to have sons' (206). She did as many things as she knew to make him come back but, in the third year, she definitely decided to make do without him. He did come home then, but it was too late, because 'her door was closed by then to his claims of love and regret' (207). Deep down in her heart, Nenita feels this is something she should also do in order to heal the wounds that her mother has inflicted on her: 'I did plead, then I purged (in my dreams at least), but with little success at home. So how to know when to stop? I never had the conviction of Nana Dora' (208). Last but not least, Nana Dora, who might be seen as Nenita's surrogate grandmother figure, tells Nenita that she worries too much (236), and gives her the most precious gift: the story of the banana heart, 'the charm that [she] kept in her pocket ever since' (237), and which she will introject to the point of taking this tale as her one and only key to survival and happiness:¹³

Close to midnight, when the heart bows from its stem, wait for its first dew. It will drop like a gem. Catch it with your tongue. When you eat the heart of the matter, you'll never grow hungry again. (237)

It is only when you face up to reality and realise what is really important in life, and cling to it at all costs, that you reach the heart of the matter, and thus plenitude, whatever your circumstances may be. It is only when you are able to reach the perfect balance between the heart and the spleen, between love and anger, that you can become mature, happy, free, that you can become a heart, that you, like Nenita, can become a red stone with black ridges because you have 'fire with the promise of burning' (73).

The association the reader is invited to establish between Nenita and the volcano is by no means accidental. Neither is the fact that the volcano and the church 'faced each other in a perpetual stand-off, as if blocked for a duel' (26). People living in Remedios Street lived between both of them, between the 'smoking peak and the soaring cross', the 'two gods' that ruled their whole existence (26).

The cross can be said to symbolise the most suffocating and oppressive side of the establishment as represented by the official Catholic church. The novel abounds in allusions to the punitive and castratory side of the Catholic faith. To give some examples: the priest refuses to say a mass for Tiyo Anding's soul because he committed suicide (174); God is described as 'our long suffering father' (159), a dull man who disapproves of human contact and dancing, since this might arouse 'the body's wayward desires' (192), who knows nothing about feasts and cakes, since he only eats 'rice gruel with fish sauce everyday' (159), and who probably wonders how on earth Nenita, 'the wrong angel in the wrong party ... could inflict a mother so' (68).

On the other hand, the volcano encapsulates the strength and potential of all of their non-conforming dreams and wishes: 'the volcano's smoke is all [their] breaths collected, [their] wish to get to heaven' (45).¹⁴ When Remedios Street becomes the abode of confrontation, resentment and insulting gossip (such as Tiya Miling's on Tiya Viring's relationship with Juanito Gwuapito, the triangle VV-Basilio Profundo-the American, Boy Hapon's suspicious isolation, and Manolito Ching's sudden departure), and it is impossible 'to see through so much spleen in the air' (166), the volcano erupts, destroying everything around it, and bringing about the 'purging' they need (167), like the Pentecostal fire that the church is unable to start. After this purging fire comes the rain, first dark, as if the sky were flushing itself, and then clean and life-giving. It seems that everything is, again, as it used to be. '[T]he guardians of the sky were back in their appointed places. The cross gleamed as if brand-new and the volcano stood calm and still' (261), but Remedios Street would never be the same. How could it be? Those who long to love and eat, those who have 'understood balance, the almost equal size of those organs shaped like a fist' (142), eventually become a heart, and leave the community for good: Tiya Viring and Juanito Gwuapito, VV and Ralph, Tiyo Anding, even Manolito Ching (he could not stand his pretentious parents!), and Nenita, of course, the most eager and generous heart of them all. The past is never past, it is always alive, and leaves perennial marks on the present and future. Some people are strong enough to face up to their past so as to learn its lessons, improve their present, and pave the way for a better future. Some others simply refuse to do it, or lack the resources to even try. After all, life is what we want to make of it, or so Nenita tries to teach her readers.

Judging from all the things so far said, it is clear that *Banana Heart Summer* is a most powerful and innovative work. Among other things, the telling and retelling of her childhood story allows forty-year-old Nenita to make sense of her life, to overcome her trauma, and to exorcise her evil memories and reconcile herself with her mother: 'Told again, a tale in fact gains conviction, the belief that it is worth telling and that the telling is worth our while' (114). The act of writing, *Banana Heart Summer* seems to claim, makes up a shelter, and unearths what would otherwise remain hidden, crossed out, and dismembered. Writing helps to transcend imperfect reality and make up for, even sublimate, unbearable pain and frustration. This conviction clearly encapsulates Merlinda Bobis's concept of writing and literature as expressed on the home page of her website:

Writing visits like grace. Its greatest gift is the comfort if not the joy of transformation. In an inspired moment, we almost believe that anguish can be made bearable and injustice can be overturned, because they can be named. And if we're lucky, joy can even be multiplied a hundredfold, so we may have reserves in the cupboard for the lean times. (online)

Writing works towards reparation, while also disclosing fissures and ruptures in what might otherwise seem an unconvincing consoling narrative. Life, like

human relationships and feelings, is by no means simple. Maybe that is the reason why Bobis suggests we need magic, the magic of literature, so that we can better understand the real and cope with our everyday anxieties, 'for what use is magic if it's not grounded in reality, if it has no flesh and blood palate that you can manipulate into hope?' (168).

As an accomplished cook, Nenita strives to make food taste better. As a nuanced poet, she feels the compulsive need to turn what would otherwise be a sordid story into one of the most beautiful tales ever written. She feels the need to forgive, to make better, and to improve the world around her. Just as water is not enough to satisfy our appetite, a superficial and monolithic account of a life story cannot possibly bring to the surface the overwhelming complexity of an individual's thoughts, feelings and behaviour, that combine to create a fragile and yet resilient human being. When Nenita tries to explain the human hunger for complexity and improvement, this is all she can conclude:

But perhaps we are born compromised to hunger, in all its variations, and just water or just rice or fish will never assuage it... So we seek for more and we cook, we spice and sweeten up, we make better, but who can blame us? (257)

Who could blame Nenita, and indeed Bobis, for concocting such fabulous meals and stories, for inserting so many ingredients and elements in her productions? It is clear that the novel's tripartite division (*The heart of the matter/ The spleen of the matter/Becoming a Heart*), together with the different symbols that it uses, food being the most important, contribute to giving it a most original and coherent structure, while also clarifying things and drawing the reader's attention towards some of the novel's most outstanding messages: namely, the inexorable need to lead an emotionally balanced life, and the urgent need for love, forgiveness and dialogue between different individuals, whatever their kinship, race, class, or gender. Bobis has once again contributed to enriching Australia's cultural panorama. By accommodating other traditions and symbolic structures, such as those provided by Bobis, mainstream Australian literature is, no doubt, becoming rather more multicultural and complex, and hence appealing, than it used to be in the past.

NOTES

- ¹ The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the MEC/FEDER, Proyecto HUM2007-61035/ FILO.
- ² In their seminal essays on the role of food, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Claude Fischler demonstrated that the domain of food includes appetite, desire, and pleasure, but also serves as a reference point for society's structure and cosmovision. See Fischler 1988 and Lévi-Strauss 1964.
- ³ From this perspective, *Banana Heart Summer* could be related to other well-known works, such as Laura Esquivel's *Como agua para chocolate* and Karen Blixen's *Babette's Feast*, which respectively inspired the internationally acclaimed films

bearing the same titles. As regards the way in which food becomes a vehicle of social healing in Bobis's novel, two novels that could also be said to belong in this strand of food literature are Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* and Michael Cunningham's *Home at the End of the World*.

- ⁴ As Merlinda Bobis states, 'Filipina domestic helpers work probably in all seven continents now. There are approximately eight million Filipino overseas workers around the world. They left their country and their families in order to survive, because the government could not take care of its own people. In 2005 their remittance to the Philippines amounted to 10.7 million US dollars. Not for nothing does the Philippine government label these Filipino contract workers as 'new heroes' (2006 16).
- ⁵ In a capitalist consumer society, the 'ethnic/other' is systematically appropriated in order to meet the needs and wishes of mainstream white culture. To put it in gastronomic terms, the 'ethnic' is very often used as a kind of seasoning that adds flavour and improves the dull dish that is dominant white culture. For more information on this concept, see hooks 1992, Figueira 1994, and Root 1996.
- ⁶ As is well known, over a period of forty years, Freud identified most of the defence mechanisms that we speak of today and identified five of their important properties: 1) defences are a major means of managing instinct and affect; 2) they are unconscious; 3) they are discrete (from one another); 4) although often the hallmarks of major psychiatric syndromes, defences are dynamic and reversible; and 5) they can be adaptive as well as pathological. By 1915, Freud had, if only in passing, identified almost all the mechanisms of defence that Anna Freud was to catalogue twenty years later in her seminal work, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, which she gave her father as his 80th birthday present.
- ⁷ Large reviews of theories of defence mechanisms are available from Paulhus, Fridhandler and Hayes (1977), and Cramer (1991), to mention but two of the most well-known. The *Journal of Personality* (1998) also published an exhaustive monographic issue on defence mechanisms.
- ⁸ The symbolism of number seven should not be overlooked. As is well known, in the Hebrew and Christian traditions, seven is the infinite number par excellence. Not in vain did Jesus Christ tell his disciples to forgive 'seventy times seven' (Matthew 4, 21–23), meaning always. It must also be noted that seven is the number of the Creation, that is, of completion and perfection. The irony in the novel is therefore obvious: unlike God, who out of infinite love created the world in six days and took a rest on the seventh, when he blessed all creatures and was satisfied that everything had been done, and was good (Genesis 2, 2–3), Nenita's mother's hatred and resentment, which have been on the increase with each pregnancy, reach their climax with her seventh child, who is consequently born dead because she does not belong there (*BHS* 252). Love generates and creates life, whereas hatred can only bring about death and unhappiness.
- ⁹ According to Vaillant (1992 247), altruism is the 'vicarious but constructive and instinctually gratifying service to others'. It can include constructive reaction formation, empathy, philanthropy, and well-repaid service to others. Altruism is to be distinguished from projection in that it responds to needs of others that are real and not projected, and from reaction formation in that the person does for others as s/he pleases, and is partly gratified by so doing.
- ¹⁰ For more information on the subject, see Hicks (1997), Yoshimi (2001) and Tanaka (2002).

- ¹¹ Interestingly enough, Nenita and her siblings will produce a similar altar, using a shoebox, their mother's wedding dress, their father's best handkerchief and candles to show their affection for their dead newborn sister, whom they decide to call Aqualita, perhaps in a desperate attempt to restore her back to eternal life as a blessed offering to the redemptive rain.
- ¹² However, it must be noted that, despite Nenita's efforts to play down this unfair hiding, this will inexorably come back to her mind when she later sees her mother beating her brother Junior in a similar way. All of a sudden, her narration becomes one childish and never-ending sentence.
- He had found his pork and was eating again, slumped on his chest but one hand still firmly around the knuckle, and he couldn't get up and the kicks wouldn't stop like his eating and I thought my lungs would burst because I was suddenly falling from the sky and the air was rushing past me, I couldn't catch it just as no one could catch me, no one, so my back would break and no one could make it better again so I found myself striding up to her and pushing, just pushing her to the wall and she was looking at me really looking now and I could see the shock in her eyes but I couldn't stop screaming I couldn't stop — (243).
- That terrible event was not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only later on, in its belated possession and haunting of Nenita. It is the very unassimilated nature of trauma, the way it was not fully known in the first place, that returns to haunt the survivor afterwards.
- ¹³ *Introjection* is a defence mechanism that is defined by Vaillant as 'the internalisation of characteristics of the object [=a loved object] with the goal of establishing closeness to and constant presence of the object' (1992 240).
- ¹⁴ When discussing the symbolism of the volcano, one should not ignore the subversive potential that it has in some of Bobis's previous works, the *Cantata of the Warrior Woman* being the most outstanding, since these interpretations undoubtedly add further layers of meaning to the novel under discussion. For more information on this, see Herrero 2007.

WORKS CITED

- Bakhtin, Mikhail [1968] 1984, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky, Indiana UP, Bloomington.
- Blixen, Karen [1987] 1988, *Babette's Feast*, Knopf, New York.
- Bobis, Merlinda 1998, 'Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon', *Summer was a Fast Train without Terminals*, Spinifex Press, Melbourne, pp. 67–200.
- 2005, *Banana Heart Summer*, Murdoch Books Australia, Sydney.
- 2006, 'Food, Precious Food: Migrating the Palate', *Kunapipi*, 28.2, pp. 10–17.
- 2008, www.merlindabobis.com.au
- Cramer, P. 1991, *The Development of Defence Mechanisms: Theory, Research, and Assessment*, Springer-Verlag, New York.
- Cunningham, Michael 1990, *Home at the End of the World*, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, New York.

- Esquivel, Laura [1989] 2001, *Como agua para chocolate*, Anchor Books, Garden City, N.Y.
- Figueira, Dorothy 1994, *The Exotic: A Decadent Quest*, SUNY P, Albany.
- Fischler, Claude 1988, 'Food, Self and Identity', *Social Science Information*, 27.2, pp. 275–92.
- Freud, Anna 1937, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence*, Hogarth Press, London.
- Herrero, M. Dolores 2007, 'Merlinda Bobis's Poem-Plays: Reading Ethics and Identity Across Cultures', *Portal: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 4.1, online, <http://epress.lib.uts.edu.au/ojs/index.php/portal>.
- Hicks, George 1997, *The Comfort Women: Japan's Brutal Regime of Enforced Prostitution in the Second World War*, W.W. Norton, New York.
- Hinz, Evelyn J. 1991, 'Introduction: Diet Consciousness and Current Literary Trends', *Mosaic* (Monographic on Diet and Discourse: Eating, Drinking and Literature), University of Manitoba Press, Winnipeg, Canada, pp. v–xiii.
- hooks, bell 1992, 'Eating the Other: Desire and Resistance', *Black Looks, Race and Representation*, South End P, Boston, pp. 21–39.
- Jelinek, Estelle C. 1980, 'Introduction: Women's Autobiography and the Male Tradition', *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, ed. Estelle C. Jelinek, Indiana UP, Bloomington, pp. 1–20.
- 1998, Special Issue on Defence Mechanisms, 66.6.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude 1964, *Le cru et le cuit*, Plon, Paris.
- Paulhus, D.L., B. Fridhandler and S. Hayes 1997, 'Psychological Defence: Contemporary Theory and Research', *Handbook of Personality Psychology*, ed. R. Hogan, J. Johnson and S.R. Briggs, Academic Press, California, pp. 543–79.
- Read, Herbert 1963, *English Prose Style*, G. Bell & Sons, London.
- Root, Deborah 1996, *Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation and the Commodification of Difference*, Westview P, Boulder.
- Tanaka, Yuki 2002, *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution During World War II and the US Occupation*, Routledge, London.
- Tyler, Anne 1982, *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*, Knopf, New York.
- Yoshimi, Yoshiaki 2001, *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military During World War II*, Columbia UP, New York.
- Vaillant, George E. 1977, *Adaptation to Life*, Little Brown, Boston.
- 1992, *Ego Mechanisms of Defense: A Guide for Clinicians and Researchers*, American Psychiatric Publishing, Arlington, VA.

Merlinda Bobis

FISH-HAIR WOMAN

Lemon grass. When the river was sweet with its scent, they came for me. Half an hour after the Angelus, *kang nag-aagaw su diklom buda su liwanag* — when the dark was wrestling with the light, as we say — they came in a haze of the first fireflies. Tinsel on the green uniforms of the three men, bordering a sleeve here, circling a belt there, filling buttonholes, dotting an insignia, and smothering the mouth of the sergeant's M16. He of the sullen face — young Ramon, wasn't it? So like a dark angel with his halo of darting lights, harbinger of omens from the river. I'm sure it's lemon grass and, *putang ina*, too many fireflies, he said, swatting the light on his pouting lips. That night, the roots of my hair knew this was going to be the last time, the last time, and I heard keening in my scalp.

A river sweet with lemon grass and breathing fireflies — how could you believe such a tale? That night, neither did I wish to believe, but in our Iraya we had mastered the art of faith, because it was the only way to believe we existed, that our village was still alive somewhere in the south of Luzon during that purge by the military. So when they asked me to come with them to fish out the lemon grass scent and give them back the river, the one that is sweetened only by the hills, I believed, and believed too that, just then, every strand of my hair heard my heart break.

Hair. How was it linked with the heart? I'll tell you — it had something to do with memory. Every time I remembered anything that unsettled my heart, my hair grew one hand span. Mamay Dulce was convinced of this phenomenon when I was six years old. *Makarawon na buhok, makarawon na puso* — very tricky hair, very tricky heart, she used to whisper to me in her singsong on mornings when I woke up to even longer hair on my pillow after a night of agitated dreams. You had long dreams last night, child, with long memories, too, she would say.

But were you alive when the soldiers came, I could have affirmed our secret tall tale with more clarity. You see, Mamay, history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp, then sprouting there into the longest strand of red hair. Some face-saving tale to explain my twelve metres of very thick black hair with its streaks of red and hide my history. I am a Filipina, tiny and dark as a coconut husk, but what red fires glint on my head! Red as the dahlia blooms on the hedge, the neighbouring kids used to whisper in awe a long time ago.

I was still as awesome that last night of my twenty-seventh year when the village believed everything, especially all the whisperings woven about me and

my hair. It was after all their salvation or the salvation of our beloved river, where much of daily life flowed, including sanity. This they believed with such insane hope, the way they trusted in undying love, in martyrdom and resurrection, and, of course, in beatific visions that made every road a possible Damascus; thus their comfort in the fireflies and lemon grass of the river even on that fatal day. Ay, the arm of conversion grows longer and more absurd on a desperate hour. Even thousands of miles away from the road where San Pablo was overpowered by the light of love, because of our own military persecution at the time, our Iraya thought that the river fireflies were shards of that old light. Perhaps, it would not strike the soldiers, but would smother them instead, their mouths, their eyes, their guns into dumbness or blindness, even into mercy. A conversion into something close to love. But, as I said, young Ramon only swatted the stray light on his forever pouting lips, then ordered me to get my hair ready for the river.

‘Fish with your hair, woman.’ Always that command which summed up my life. After the government declared its total war against the rebels, I realised the purpose of my being, why I had come to be such a freak of nature, why I was more hair than body, the span of it nearly thrice my whole frame. What incredible length and thickness and strength. Not my beauty as one would usually boast of this crowning glory, but my scourge, which made me feel and look top heavy, as if anytime I would be dragged down by whirlpools of black with red lights and there get lost, never to be found again.

Where is she? Always the question which passed from lips to lips, all pursed between a knowing smile and worry or pain, much like the way a mouth contorts after the first sip of good fish soup that had too much lemon in it. Where is she? Ay, washing her hair in the river, of course, or, drying it now, perhaps, combing it, braiding it — but where is she? With her hair, where else, the whole of our Iraya chuckled. Where is she? Eating with her hair, sleeping with her hair, taking her hair for a wander.

But they would never say, cutting it. If anyone as much as whispered this disaster, the whole village would have been at my door, a desperate stampede of hearts arguing, weeping for their river’s sake, for their lives’ sake — *buhok ni Estrella, kaheraki kami*. Hair of Estrella, have mercy on us. The only time when they would speak or even remember my name. Where is she? With her hair. Who is she? The Fish-Hair Woman. How little we know or wish to know of the history of our icons or our saints or our gods. It is enough that we invent for them a present and believe that they can save us from ourselves. But, no, I will not allow you to invent me, too, you who read this, so I will tell you everything. And if you need saving at all, understand that I had relinquished salvation after that last night by the river.

*lambat na itom na itom
pero sa dugo natumtom
samong babaying parasira*

*buhok pangsalar-pangsira
kang samong mga padaba
hale sa salog...*

very black net
but blood-soaked
our fisherwoman
hair to save-fish
all our beloved
from the river...

... from the river, Sergeant Ramon mumbled the refrain of this local song to the first Australian in our Iraya, while pointing the M16 at him. It was three months before that night of lemon grass and fireflies, on another night when the rifles were silvered by the moon, when I met Tony McIntyre. Trouble-maker-researcher-cum-crazy-nosy-tourist-cum-bullshitting-novelist-in-search-for-material-is-why-he-is-here-he-says, the sergeant babbled, a jealous quaver in his breathlessness. The Australian was caught spying on me as I unbraided my hair at the bank of the river, and there was a bit of a chase, an understatement by Tony who later told me that it felt like a scene from a 'Nam documentary. Among the limonsito and milflores, he thought he could vanish in a jungle of red berries and lilac blooms, his pink and white face hopefully blending with the tropical foliage, until he felt the cold nudge of steel on his nape — get up, you spying *Amerikano*! And Tony thought, thank god, I'm Australian, then stupidly broke into a run — but Ramon would never shoot anyone in front of me. Hello, I held out a hand to the ashen-faced stranger, and Ramon never forgave him.

But forgive me if I'm outrunning you who read this. This is how my hair remembers, always without restraint, quickly netting the past in a swirl of black with red fire. Such was the thought that occurred to me after the sullen boy-soldier ordered me to prepare for my final trek to the river.

'You're eating fireflies, Ramon.' A strange voice, sorrow creeping at the edges. I realised it was mine.

Under my hut's window, his lips shimmered with the tinsel creatures of the night. 'Quickly woman — and shut up!'

The two other men waited at the steps while their young sergeant charged up my stairs with a cloud of fireflies. 'Pests, pests,' he waved them away with the butt of his gun. 'This is what he brought with him, pestilence. Can't you see now?'

'Fireflies and lemon grass never hurt anyone.' My scalp ached so. Piled on my head, the braids of hair began to grow again. A chain of hand spans, too much remembering. Enough, enough, I wanted to scream at this phosphorescent boy whose face was contorted with jealousy.

'The river is not fit for drinking again, don't you know that? Lemon grass taste, bah! And the light from these flies, *putang ina*! They've scared all the fishes

away!’ His grip on my arm bordered on an urgent caress as he thrust his tortured face to mine. ‘All because you fucked him!’

Tony McIntyre, my lover who had come all the way from the base of the earth, the land of big rocks and waves, to gather our grief into print, so he could purge his own. My beloved mid-life-crisis Australian with the solemn green eyes, flecked with brown, and the perfect curve of brow. He who quoted Rilke and re-invented my Catholic angel by the light of the *gasera* at the foot of my mat. He gaped at my hair the first time I unbraided it for him. Hell, this is unreal, he murmured fervently, as if in a prayer, kissing the tips of my hair. ‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror...’

He wept, was horrified and ashamed the first time he came to see me take my hair to the river on a wet high noon. The soldiers were restless while the whole village waited, each one praying, please, let it not be him, not my husband’s body, or, *Santa Maria*, I’d rather it’s my son this time, relieve this endless wait, time to come home now, or, *Madre de Dios*, let her be found at least still whole, ay, my most foolish youngest. And all hearts marking time at the bank, nearly breaking in unison as I, hair undone like a net, descended into the dark waters to fish out another victim of our senseless war.

Desaparecidos. Our disappeared, ay, so many of them. And the lovers left behind became obsessed with doors — one day, my son, daughter, husband or wife will be framed at the doorway. Behind the beloved will be so much light, and we shall be overcome by the fulfillment of our waiting.

They will come back — or will they? They did, one by one, through the water’s door, from the darkness into the light.

And I served this homecoming. Fished out their bodies that returned from our river’s whirlpool, deep down from the navel of the water, while the soldiers looked the other way. They could not understand why each body was so heavy, it always sank and never surfaced, until I rescued it. It seemed to want to vanish forever — no, each body only wants to become part of the water for a while, to make sure we never forget the taste of its being, Pay Inyo, the old gravedigger, said.

Perhaps, he was right, for every time a new body was thrown into the river, the water always changed flavour, no longer sweetened by the hills but tasting almost like brine, raw and sharp with minerals. Like fresh blood, Pay Inyo understood this to be the dead one’s curse on memory, so we would never forget him or her who had been loved.

You’re crazy, your village is crazy, this is mad, a nightmare, why, how could you ... this is not happening, I don’t understand, I don’t know ... Tony wept on my wet, salty hair that had earlier wrapped the naked body of a sixteen year old *amazona*, a female guerrilla. She hardly had any face left. Dark blotches, the size of a fist, covered her pelvis and breasts that had lost their nipples. In my hut, Tony raved, twisting my black rope around his arms and face as if wanting to shut out

the vision. In his shock, he did not notice that my hair was growing several hand spans longer; I was remembering for the dead the contours of her lost face. Tony was inconsolable.

I had to take him into my home, because Pay Inyo said he would not have a man go mad in his house, it is bad luck, there's enough bad luck as it is. Besides, you're the one with some education, I only have crooked English, you know, the old man added. Ramon's eyes darkened when I led the sobbing Tony away from the bank where an eighty-year-old grandmother dumbly caressed the corpse's feet as if she were trying to remember something. I realised that, by then, my village had forgotten how to cry.

'Sissy Australian. *Bakla!*' Ramon spat at Tony's back.

Back. My back, most loved. The night before he disappeared, Tony marvelled at how thin I was from behind. You people are so thin. Your vertebrae jut out, you know, he said, counting the ladders to my nape, kissing each bone, christening every hillock with the name of a gem. Sapphire, lapis lazuli, jade, ruby ... often, I remembered his lips and the trail of precious stones on my back, and always my hair hurt.

But let's trade them for something more valuable than rungs of kisses, Tony, for something like fishes and loaves of bread — white or brown — like those in your country where it's easy to choose, because there are choices. The village has owned my hair, so why can't they have my bones as well?

'Time to go, Estrella, time to go...' Tony had hushed my bitter query.

After I fished out a boy's body, which nobody claimed, the cracks began to show. He must have been ten years old. The small head was thrown too far back, flopping behind him. Around his neck was a necklace of weeds and the fattest prawns. Thank god, it's not ours, but whose is it? We don't know. It must be from the next village. But it can't be one of the rebels; it's too tiny, too young. It is not 'it!' I screamed, and for the first time the village that had forgotten how to cry, saw that perhaps I was beginning to remember how, behind all sockets, there can be no real drought for the eye.

You who read this and shiver at this macabre war, may you never need to pretend that you have forgotten. And may you never know the kinship between fishing for the dead and actual killing. The first time you do either, you break. You, too, die within, thus you begin to practice the art of uncaring, teach your gut to behave for the sake of your own salvation, so that the next time and the next, it becomes easier to cross with mortality. Then you can at least breathe and thank heaven that it is not you who had fallen. But, somewhere at the tail-end of that numbed routine, you give once more. You break, and no amount of practice can put you back together again.

'I don't think I can do it again — ever,' my voice was so hollow, one could knock at it and hear one's knuckles echoing through.

'*Putang ina*, you're getting soft, big hair.' Ramon yanked at my braids. The black and red rope coiled at my feet.

‘I might know who is — down there — I can’t do it.’ Something was catching in my throat, I couldn’t breathe.

‘Why, you have e.s.p., too, woman?’ Around his Adam’s apple, the skin rippled as he laughed.

Before Tony arrived, I suspected that the sergeant had slyly desired me, maybe even worshipped me, in some grudging way, for my nerves of stone. After each dive, he would never look at what surfaced with me. He only stared at my brown body in the wet *tapis*, then at my face, always at my face, as if hoping to find some sign of breaking, for he never saw me weep over any of the corpses that I netted even when the whole riverbank howled. She has secret powers inside, Pay Inyo had said, thumping at his chest; in war, we need secret powers. No one knew that my hair stole all the grief from my face. How could anyone see the ache in my scalp, the trick of memory, the betrayal of nerves at the roots of my hair? Come to think of it, it’s not my ancestry, not my father’s Spanish blood, but the flush of blood from the heart that had cursed the red into my hair.

My hair, the anchor for the remnants of a village, for the soldiers, and, later, for Tony. The disappeared could at least be found for a decent burial. And the river would be restored to its old taste, sweetened again by the hills. Then we could fish again or wash our clothes there again, or gather the *kangkong* and *gabi* leaves at its bank again. It meant sustenance, as food from the town had been scarce. Even the soldiers depended on the river for their daily needs. So why dump the bodies there? The soldiers said it wasn’t them, they said the rain washed the bodies down to the river.

But how could you drink this, eat — my god! Tony gagged over the fish steamed in lemon grass after he witnessed the rescue of the young female guerrilla. The following day, he refused to eat or drink. His limbs went cold and locked around him, then he developed a chill, even as his sweat soaked my mat. He became incoherent for weeks. Nearly deranged by his strange ailment, he would scream about the lemon grass fish growing fat and swimming inside the belly of the dead girl. I thought he was going to die. I wrapped him with my hair each night to keep him warm, then fell in love.

Another river swells on desperate nights like this, flowing in the pelvis. Strange how, when close to death, we become more intimate with desire. One tries to hide it, but this river overflows. Each night, when I hushed his cries and calmed his shaking, my *tapis* betrayed me, re-weaving its flowers into fishes that circled my hipbone, which grew as luminous as the moon on the river, while the fishes swam to my breasts, biting behind the nipples. His cold, blue fingers reached for them, coaxing the fishes to leap out. Then, underneath my hair, he loved me over and over again, until the chill half-ebbed from his flesh, because I had shared it with mine — ay, dear reader, my scalp hurts again. I can hear the strands pushing out and stretching; it is the hum of memory, my beloved mumbling about winter love in the tropics, his breath tinged with lemon grass.

‘Was he that good?’ Ramon grabbed me by the waist, and pulled me to him. His young breath travelled my face from brow to chin and back. ‘Really good?’ he sniggered.

Yes, he was as good as any man who had come to the end of his journey, back to himself, but only to himself. I’ll take you away, Tony had promised. I’ll take you back with me, back to the light. And we will cut that hair.

Back to clean, sunny beaches where I could have long weekend breakfasts and gaze at the water that never changes flavour? Strange, lucky Aus-traayl-yuh, savoured in one lazy roll of the tongue — but not home, never home, Tony. He made ready to leave anyway, so he could arrange something for me, for us at his embassy. The sharpest pair of scissors to cut me off from my river.

As he was about to go, I unbraided my hair, which he could not bear to see loose after he had recovered. I spread it around the house, hoping he would understand. You know, Tony, all of this is destiny, I whispered as he left, but he never heard me. I saw lights in his eyes. He seemed happy, even inspired, perhaps at the thought of taking his lover home with her cropped mane. Time to go, he had said after we buried the ten-year-old’s body together. He had rocked me to sleep then, wondering why there were no tears though my voice cracked with sorrow. Later, he noticed the faint streaks of white at my nape. ‘For beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror...’ and we have no need of that, Estrella.

Lemon grass and fireflies this time, strange, but how beautiful, perhaps a miracle, perhaps salvation, one never knows, shards of the holy light of Damascus, maybe, sent for the soldiers ... and the river, *aysus*, it does not taste like fresh blood, not at all ... Pay Inyo brought me the news. His bony frame, hunched at the bottom of my steps, was only a blur. But we want our river to taste only like our river, he made the point of his visit. I can’t do it, no, oh, god, no, please, but I knew that I could not escape my final appointment with the river. My hair awoke to the knowledge and my scalp ached as it had never ached before. I wanted to pull out every strand that heard my heart break then bang my head on the wall.

‘He wasn’t that good after all — ’ Ramon paused, slowing his words for effect. ‘Your pale sissy did not even know how to fight — like a man.’ He shoved his lips onto mine.

A stone sank in my womb. ‘You cur, you beast — *hayop!*’ I bit his lips and kicked him in the groin, then lashed out with my braids of black and red, screaming, cur, cur, cur!

‘*Putang ina!*’ He tried to duck the blows as he cocked his rifle and yelled out to his men. The welts were blooming on his face and arms, the curse of my red lights.

‘So you’re the better man? Oh, yes, pull the trigger, brave Ramon,’ I sneered, gripping my whip of hair, eyes blurred and stinging.

‘Ah, you cry after all, Fish-Hair Woman,’ the boy-sergeant smirked, deliberately laying down his weapon as he approached me. ‘But we’ll need nerves for this job, won’t we?’ His voice was dangerously tender.

I raised my whip once more. His men cocked their rifles. I let my hair fall.

‘In her heart, she knows she’ll do it — don’t you?’ Ramon unbraided my hair slowly, taking great pleasure in smoothing it out into a net, for, as he suspected, that was the first time someone other than Tony and the dead had touched my hair. The men watched this defilement in absurd respect, and the fireflies returned, circling their guns, drawing halos.

We went, a grim procession to the river, guarded by a host of flying lights, the soldiers holding my hair like a bridal train. Again, I remembered his lips and the precious stones on my back and the river in my pelvis and his lemon grass fish swimming into it from the belly of a dead girl now growing her face and nipples back, and her grandmother rubbing her feet as if trying to remember something, and the soft mound of earth singing the ten-year-old bones to sleep.

Thus the betrayal of memory, while the soldiers marvelled at how my hair grew and grew in their hands. They were in on the secret now. They knew that, once I dived into the waters sweet with lemon grass, I would never leave my heart on the bank again.

Merlinda Bobis

MUJER PELO-PEZ

Translated by Dolores Herrero from Merlinda Bobis's original short story, 'Fish-Hair Woman', in *White Turtle* (1999), North Melbourne, Spinifex, pp. 10–23.

Hierba de limón. Cuando su dulce aroma impregnaba el río, vinieron a por mí. Media hora después del Ángelus, *kang nag-aagaw su diklom buda su liwanag* — cuando la oscuridad se batía en duelo con la luz, como decimos nosotros — vinieron envueltos por la calima de las primeras luciérnagas. Espumillón sobre los uniformes verdes de los tres hombres, ribeteando una manga aquí, envolviendo un cinturón allá, rellenando ojales, moteando una insignia, y ahogando el cañón del M16 del sargento. El de la cara enfurruñada — el joven Ramón, ¿no? Como un ángel oscuro con su halo de luces como dardos, heraldo de presagios procedentes del río. Estoy segura de que es hierba de limón y, *putang ina*, demasiadas luciérnagas, dijo, aplastando la luz en sus labios enfurecidos. Esa noche, las raíces de mi pelo supieron que ésta iba a ser la última vez, la última vez, y oí un lamento en mi cabellera.

Un río dulce con hierba de limón y luciérnagas suspirantes — ¿cómo puedes creer semejante historia? Aquella noche, tampoco yo quería creer, pero en nuestra Iraya habíamos depurado el arte de la fe, porque ésta era la única forma de creer que existíamos, que nuestro pueblo seguía vivo en alguna parte del sur de Luzón durante aquella purga de la milicia. Así que cuando me pidieron que les acompañara para pescar el aroma de hierba de limón y devolverles el río, el que tan sólo está endulzado por las colinas, creí, y creí también que, justo entonces, todos los mechones de mi pelo oían cómo mi corazón se rompía.

Pelo. ¿Cómo se vinculaba con el corazón? Te lo diré — tenía algo que ver con la memoria. Cada vez que recordaba algo que perturbaba mi corazón, mi pelo crecía un palmo. Mamay Dulce estaba convencida de este fenómeno cuando yo tenía seis años. *Makarawon na buhok, makarawon na puso* — un pelo muy pícaro, un corazón muy pícaro, solía susurrarme al oído con su habitual sonsonete las mañanas que me despertaba y descubría al contemplar mi almohada que mi pelo había crecido después de una noche de sueños agitados. Tuviste muchos sueños anoche, niña, y muchos recuerdos también, decía.

Si hubieras estado viva cuando los soldados vinieron, podría haber reafirmado nuestra increíble historia secreta con más claridad. ¿Ves, Mamay? La historia hiere mi pelo, ¿lo sabías? Recordar siempre implica desangrar la memoria, como cuando se tira de una vena del corazón, una coagulación tan fina, kilómetros ascendiendo hasta mi cabellera, para después brotar ahí en el mechón más largo

de pelo rojo. Un cuento para salvar las apariencias y explicar mis doce metros de pelo negro muy recio con mechas rojas y así ocultar mi historia. Soy filipina, menuda y oscura como la corteza de un coco, pero ¡qué destellos de fuego rojo en mi cabeza! Rojo como florece la dalia en el seto, los niños del vecindario solían susurrar con temor hace mucho tiempo.

Así de imponente estaba yo aquella última noche de mis veintisiete años cuando el pueblo se creía todo, especialmente todos los rumores que se habían fraguado en torno a mí y a mi pelo. Era, después de todo, la salvación suya o la de nuestro amado río, donde gran parte de la vida cotidiana fluía, incluyendo la cordura. En esto creían con tal desmedida esperanza, al igual que creían en el amor imperecedero, en el martirio y la resurrección y, por supuesto, en visiones beatíficas que hacían de cualquier camino un posible Damasco; así se entiende el consuelo que encontraban en las luciérnagas y la hierba de limón incluso en ese día fatal. Ay, el brazo de la conversión se hace más largo y más absurdo en una hora desesperada. Incluso a miles de millas del camino donde San Pablo se vio sobrecogido por la luz del amor, debido a la persecución militar a la que estábamos sometidos entonces, nuestra Iraya pensaba que las luciérnagas del río eran añicos de esa antigua luz. Quizás no golpeará a los soldados, sino que en su lugar los ahogará, sus bocas, sus ojos, sus armas, en mutismo o ceguera, en misericordia incluso. Una conversión a algo parecido al amor. Pero, como dije, el joven Ramón sólo aplastaba la luz en sus labios eternamente enfurecidos, cuando me ordenó preparar mi pelo para el río.

‘Pesca con tu pelo, mujer.’ Siempre esa orden que resumía toda mi vida. Cuando el gobierno declaró la guerra total contra los rebeldes, me di cuenta del propósito de mi existencia, de por qué me había convertido en semejante monstruo de la naturaleza, de por qué era más pelo que cuerpo, siendo la longitud de éste casi tres veces mi tamaño. ¡Qué longitud, espesor y fuerza tan increíbles! No era tanto la belleza de esta corona gloriosa de la que cualquiera hubiera presumido, sino mi resistencia, la que me hacía sentir y parecer tremendamente pesada, como si en cualquier momento pudiera ser arrastrada al fondo por remolinos de negro con luces rojas y perderme allí, para no ser encontrada nunca jamás.

¿Dónde está? Siempre la misma pregunta pasando de unos labios a otros, todos ellos frunciendo un gesto a caballo entre una sonrisa confiada y uno de preocupación o de pena, parecido a la manera en que la boca se contorsiona después del primer sorbo de sopa de pescado con demasiado limón. ¿Dónde está? Ay, lavando su pelo en el río, por supuesto, o secándolo ahora, tal vez, peinándolo, trenzándolo — ¿pero dónde está? Todo Iraya se reía de su pelo, ¡de qué si no! ¿Dónde está? Comiendo con su pelo, durmiendo con su pelo, sacando su pelo a pasear.

Pero nunca dirían, cortádoselo. Si alguien hubiera tan siquiera musitado este desastre, todo el pueblo se hubiera agolpado a mi puerta, una estampida desesperada de corazones suplicando, llorando por su río, por sus vidas — *buhok ni Estrella, kaheraki kami*. Pelo de Estrella, ten piedad de nosotros. Ese era el único momento en el que pronunciaban o recordaban mi nombre. ¿Dónde está?

Con su pelo. ¿Quién es? La Mujer Pelo-Pez. ¡Qué poco sabemos o queremos saber de la historia de nuestros iconos, nuestros santos y nuestros dioses! Nos basta con inventar para ellos un presente y creer que nos pueden salvar de nosotros mismos. Pero no, no permitiré que me inventes, también tú, el que lee esto, así que te lo contaré todo. Y si por un casual necesitas salvación, comprende que renuncié a la salvación aquella última noche junto al río.

*lambat na itom na itom
pero sa dugo natumtom
samong babaying parasira
buhok pangsalar-pangsira
kang samong mga padaba
hale sa salog...*

red negrísima
aunque empapada en sangre
el pelo de nuestra pescadora
que salva-pesca
a todos nuestros seres queridos
del río...

... del río. El sargento Ramón mascullaba el estribillo de esta canción popular al primer australiano que vino a nuestra Iraya, mientras le apuntaba con el M16. Ocurrió tres meses antes de aquella noche de hierba de limón y luciérnagas, la noche en la que la luna bañó a los rifles de plata, cuando conocí a Tony McIntyre. Investigador-agitador-y-turista-loco entrometido-y-mierda-de-novelistas-buscando-material-dice-que-es-y-por-lo que-está-aquí, balbuceó el sargento, con un jadeo trémulo y envidioso. El australiano fue pillado espíandome cuando deshilaba mi pelo a la orilla del río, y se produjo una especie de persecución, todo un eufemismo por parte de Tony, que más tarde me contó que fue como una escena sacada de un documental sobre Vietnam. Entre el *limonsito* y las milflores, pensó que podía desaparecer en una jungla de bayas rojas y capullos de lilas, su cara rosa y blanca confundiendo con suerte con el follaje tropical, hasta que sintió el frío codazo del acero en su nuca — ¡levanta, espía *amerikano*! Y Tony pensó, gracias a Dios que soy australiano, y se echó a correr de forma estúpida — pero Ramón nunca hubiera disparado a nadie delante de mí. Hola, tendí una mano al extranjero de cara cenicienta, y Ramón nunca me perdonó.

Pero perdóname si te estoy dejando atrás, a ti, que estás leyendo esto. Así es como mi pelo recuerda, siempre sin medida, atrapando el pasado en un torbellino de negro con fuego rojo. Tal fue el pensamiento que me asaltó después de que el enfurruñado muchacho-soldado me ordenara prepararme para mi última caminata hasta el río.

‘Estás comiendo luciérnagas, Ramón.’ Una voz extraña, la pena trepando por los bordes. Me di cuenta de que era la mía.

Bajo la ventana de mi cabaña, sus labios relucían con las criaturas-espumillón de la noche. ‘¡Rápido mujer — y cállate!’

Los otros dos hombres esperaban a la entrada, mientras su joven sargento subía a toda prisa los escalones, envuelto en una nube de luciérnagas. ‘¡Qué peste, qué pestel!’ y las espantaba con la culata de su pistola. ‘Esto es lo que trajo consigo, pestilencia. ¿Acaso no lo ves?’

‘Las luciérnagas y la hierba de limón no hacen daño a nadie.’ ¡Mi cabellera me dolía tanto! Apiladas en mi cabeza, las trenzas de pelo comenzaron a crecer de nuevo. Basta, basta, quería gritar a este muchacho fosforescente, con la cara contorsionada por los celos.

‘No se puede beber del río de nuevo, ¿lo sabías? Sabor a hierba de limón, ¡ja! Y la luz que desprenden estas moscas, *¡putang ina!* Han espantado a todos los peces’. Su manera de asirme por el brazo rayaba en una caricia precipitada según acercaba bruscamente su torturada cara a la mía. ‘¡Y todo porque te lo follaste!’

Tony McIntyre, mi amante que había venido desde el lejano fondo de la tierra, desde la tierra de enormes rocas y olas, para poner nuestro sufrimiento por escrito, de forma que así pudiera purgar el suyo propio. Mi amado australiano en plena crisis de madurez, y con esos ojos verdes tan solemnes, salpicados de marrón, y con esas cejas tan perfectamente arqueadas. El, que citó a Rilke y reinventó mi ángel católico a la luz de la *gasera*, a los pies de mi estera. Se quedó boquiabierto la primera vez que me solté el pelo para él. Demonio, esto es irreal, murmuraba fervientemente, como en una oración, a la vez que besaba las puntas de mi pelo. ‘La belleza no es más que el comienzo del terror...’

Lloró, se sintió horrorizado y avergonzado la primera vez que vino a ver cómo llevaba mi pelo al río un húmedo mediodía. Los soldados estaban impacientes mientras todo el pueblo aguardaba, todos y cada uno de ellos rezando, por favor, que no sea él, que no sea el cadáver de mi marido, o, Santa María, ¿a que se trata de mi hijo esta vez?, libranos de esta interminable espera, hora de volver a casa, o, Madre de Dios, permite que la encuentren entera al menos, ay, mi muy querida y alocada pequeña. Y todos los corazones latían en la orilla, a punto de romperse al unísono, mientras yo, con mi pelo desplegado como una red, me sumergía en las oscuras aguas para rescatar otra víctima de nuestra absurda guerra.

Desaparecidos. Nuestros desaparecidos, ay, ¡tantos! Y los seres queridos que quedaron atrás se obsesionaban con puertas — un día, mi hijo, mi hija, mi marido o mi mujer asomará a la puerta. Un haz de luz resplandeciente envolverá al ser querido, y nos sentiremos exultantes por el final feliz de nuestra espera.

Volverán — ¿no? Si, volvieron, uno a uno, cruzando el umbral del agua, de la oscuridad a la luz.

Y yo propicié este reencuentro. Pesqué sus cuerpos, que retornaron del remolino de nuestro río, desde el fondo más profundo, mientras los soldados miraban para otro lado. No podían comprender por qué cada cuerpo eran tan pesado, se hundía y nunca emergía — no, cada cuerpo quiere ser uno con el agua durante un tiempo, para asegurarse de que nunca olvidaremos su sabor, dijo Pay Inyo, el viejo enterrador.

Quizás tenía razón, ya que cada vez que un cuerpo era arrojado al río, el agua siempre cambiaba de sabor, ya no tenía el sabor dulce de las colinas, sino que sabía casi a salmuera, un crudo y penetrante sabor a mineral. A sangre fresca. Pay Inyo sabía que ésta era la maldición que los muertos echaban sobre la memoria, para que nunca olvidemos a aquel o aquella que amamos.

Estás loca, tu pueblo está loco, esto es una locura, una pesadilla, ¿por qué?, cómo pudiste ... esto no está sucediendo, no entiendo, no se ... Tony lloró sobre mi cabello húmedo y salado, que antes había envuelto el cuerpo desnudo de una amazona de dieciséis años, una guerrillera. Apenas le quedaba cara. Manchas oscuras, del tamaño de un puño, cubrían su pelvis y sus pechos que habían perdido sus pezones. En mi cabaña, Tony pareció volverse loco, enroscando mi sogá negra alrededor de sus brazos y su cara, como si quisiera desterrar esa visión. En su estado de shock, no se dio cuenta de que mi pelo había crecido varios palmos; yo recordaba para los muertos el contorno de su cara perdida. Tony no tenía consuelo.

Tuve que llevarlo a mi casa, porque Pay Inyo dijo que en modo alguno albergaría en su casa a un hombre que se estaba volviendo loco, es mala suerte, y ya tenemos bastante mala suerte. Además, tú eres la que tiene estudios, yo sólo hablo un inglés macarrónico, ¿sabes?, añadió el viejo. Los ojos de Ramón se oscurecieron cuando alejé al compungido Tony de la orilla, donde una abuela de ochenta años acariciaba los pies del cadáver con un semblante ausente, como si intentara recordar algo. Me di cuenta de que mi pueblo ya había olvidado cómo llorar.

‘Australiano afeminado. ¡*Bakla!*’ Ramón escupió en la espalda de Tony.

La espalda. Mi muy querida espalda. La noche anterior a su desaparición, Tony se maravillaba de lo delgada que yo era por detrás. Vosotros sois tan delgados. Vuestras vértebras sobresalen, ¿sabes? y contaba los peldaños hasta mi nuca, besando cada hueso, bautizando cada montículo con el nombre de una gema. Zafiro, lapislázuli, jade, rubí ... a menudo, yo recordaba sus labios y el reguero de piedras preciosas sobre mi espalda, y mi pelo no dejaba de doler.

Pero intercambiémoslas por algo más valioso que sartas de besos, Tony, por algo como peces y hogazas de pan — blanco o moreno — como las que hay en tu país, donde es tan fácil elegir, porque hay variedad. El pueblo se ha adueñado de mi pelo, ¿por qué no se habrían de adueñar también de mis huesos?

‘Hora de irnos, Estrella, hora de irnos...’ Tony había esquivado mi amarga pregunta.

Después de que pesqué del río el cuerpo de un niño, que nadie reclamó, las grietas comenzaron a asomar. Tenía que tener unos diez años. Su pequeña cabeza muy hacia atrás, colgando detrás suyo. Alrededor de su cuello había un collar de algas y gambas de las más gordas. Gracias a Dios que no es nuestro, pero, ¿de quién es? No sabemos. Debe ser del pueblo de al lado. Pero eso no puede ser uno de los rebeldes, es demasiado diminuto, demasiado joven. ¡No es ‘eso’!, grité,

y por primera vez, el pueblo que había olvidado cómo llorar, vio que tal vez yo estaba empezando a recordar, detrás de las cuencas oculares, no hay sequedad.

Tu que lees esto y te estremeces ante esta guerra macabra, que nunca tengas que fingir que te has olvidado. Que nunca tengas que discernir entre pescar para los muertos y matar. La primera vez que haces cualquiera de las dos cosas, te rompes. Tú también te mueres por dentro, y empiezas a practicar el arte de vencer el miedo, de mostrar a tus tripas cómo comportarse en aras de tu propia salvación, de forma que, la siguiente vez y las siguientes, resulta más fácil cruzarse con la muerte. Entonces puedes al menos respirar y dar gracias al cielo de que no eres tu el que ha caído. Pero, en alguna parte remota de esa rutina entumecedora, te das por vencido una vez más. Te rompes, y no hay nada que pueda volver a componerte.

‘No creo que pueda hacerlo de nuevo — nunca,’ mi voz sonaba tan hueca, que alguien podía llamar a sus puertas y oír el eco de sus propios nudillos.

‘*Putang ina*, te estás ablandando, pelo largo.’ Ramón tiró de mis trenzas. La sogá negra y roja se enroscó a mis pies.

‘Podría saber quién es — ahí abajo — no puedo hacerlo.’ Algo estrangulaba mi garganta, no podía respirar.

¡Qué, mujer!, ¿tienes poderes extrasensoriales? Alrededor de su nuez, su piel se estremecía según se reía.

Antes de que Tony llegara, sospeché que el sargento me había deseado furtivamente, tal vez incluso venerado con cierta envidia malsana por mis nervios de piedra. Después de cada zambullida, se negaba a mirar lo que emergía conmigo. El sólo miraba mi cuerpo moreno envuelto en el *tapis* mojado, y luego mi cara, siempre mi cara, como esperando ver algún signo de derrumbamiento, ya que nunca me vio llorar por ninguno de los cadáveres que pesqué, ni siquiera cuando toda la orilla del río daba alaridos de dolor. Tiene poderes secretos en su interior, Pay Inyo había dicho, golpeándose el pecho; en tiempos de guerra, necesitamos poderes secretos. Nadie sabía que mi pelo robaba toda la pena de mi cara. ¿Cómo podía nadie ver el dolor en mi cabellera, los trucos que hacía mi memoria, o cómo me traicionaban los nervios en las raíces de mi pelo? Ahora que lo pienso, no son mis antepasados, ni la sangre española de mi padre, sino el flujo de sangre del corazón que ha maldecido a mi pelo con rojo.

Mi pelo, el ancla de los que quedan en el pueblo, de los soldados, y, después, de Tony. Los desaparecidos podían al menos ser encontrados para tener un entierro digno. Y el río recobraría su sabor original, de nuevo endulzado por las colinas. Entonces podríamos pescar de nuevo, o lavar la ropa de nuevo, o recoger hojas *kangkong* y *gabi* en sus orillas de nuevo. Eso representaba su sustento, cuando la comida escaseaba en la ciudad. Incluso los soldados dependían del río para sus necesidades cotidianas. Entonces, ¿por qué arrojar los cadáveres allí? Los soldados decían que no eran ellos, decían que la lluvia arrastraba los cadáveres al río.

Pero cómo puedes beber esto, comer — ¡Dios mío! Tony se atragantó con el pescado cocinado al vapor con hierba de limón después de presenciar el rescate de la joven guerrillera. Al día siguiente, rehusó comer o beber. Sus miembros se entumecieron y bloquearon, y después se quedó frío, a pesar de que su sudor empapaba mi estera. Permaneció confuso durante semanas. A punto de enloquecer a causa de esta extraña dolencia, gritaba que el pez de la hierba de limón engordaba y nadaba dentro del vientre de la muchacha muerta. Pensé que iba a morir. Lo envolví con mi pelo cada noche para mantenerlo caliente, entonces me enamoré.

Hay otro río que crece en noches desesperadas como ésta, que fluye en la pelvis. Es extraño cómo, cuando la muerte se acerca, nuestro deseo es más acuciante. Una intenta ocultarlo, pero este río se desborda. Cada noche, cuando acallaba sus gritos y calmaba sus temblores, mi *tapis* me traicionaba, retejiendo sus flores en forma de peces que rodeaban el hueso de mi cadera, que crecían tan luminosos como la luna sobre el río, mientras los peces nadaban hasta mis pechos, mordisqueando por debajo de mis pezones. Sus dedos fríos y azules intentaban tocarlos, engatusándolos para que saltaran fuera. Entonces, debajo de mi pelo, me hacía el amor una y otra vez, hasta que el frío abandonaba parcialmente su carne, porque lo había compartido con el mío — ay, querido lector, mi cabellera me duele otra vez. Puedo oír sus mechones estirándose y alargándose; es el zumbido de la memoria, mi amado musitando algo acerca del amor en invierno en el trópico, su aliento perfumado con hierba de limón.

‘¿Tan bueno era?’ Ramón me agarró por la cintura, y me empujó hacia él. Su joven aliento atravesó mi cara desde la ceja hasta el mentón y al revés. ‘¿Tan bueno?’ Y se reía sarcásticamente.

Si, era tan bueno como cualquier hombre que ha llegado al final de su camino, de regreso a sí mismo, pero sólo a sí mismo. Te llevaré lejos, Tony había prometido. Te me llevaré conmigo, de vuelta a la luz. Y cortaremos ese pelo.

¿De regreso a playas limpias y soleadas donde pudiera tener largos desayunos de fines de semana y contemplar el agua que nunca cambia de aroma? Extraña, afortunada *Aus-traayl-yuh*, saboreada por la lengua que la pronuncia perezosa — pero no mi hogar, nunca mi hogar, Tony. De cualquier manera se preparó para marchar, para poder organizar algo para mí, para nosotros en su embajada. Las tijeras más afiladas para cortarme de mi río.

Según estaba a punto de irse, deshilé mi pelo, que desde que se recuperó no había podido ver suelto. Lo extendí por la casa, esperando que comprendiera. Sabes Tony, todo esto es el destino, susurré mientras se iba, pero nunca me oyó. Vi luces en sus ojos. Parecía feliz, incluso inspirado, tal vez al pensar que iba a llevar a su amada a su hogar y con su melena cortada. Hora de irse, dijo después de que enterramos juntos al niño de diez años. Me había mecido para que me durmiera, preguntándose por qué no tenía lágrimas cuando mi voz se quebraba de dolor. Después, descubrió las finas estrías blancas en mi nuca. ‘La belleza no es más que el comienzo del terror...’ y no necesitamos eso, Estrella.

Hierba de limón y luciérnagas esta vez, extraño, pero qué bello, quizás un milagro, quizás la salvación, una nunca sabe, añicos de la luz sagrada de Damasco, tal vez, enviados para los soldados... y el río, *aysus*, no sabe a sangre fresca, en absoluto ... Pay Inyo me trajo noticias. Su cuerpo huesudo, agazapado al final de mi escalera, era sólo un contorno borroso. Pero nosotros queremos que nuestro río sepa sólo a río, dejó claro el motivo de su visita. No puedo hacerlo, no, por favor, Dios, pero el sabía que no podía faltar a mi última cita. Mi pelo se dio cuenta de ello, y mi cabellera me dolió como nunca antes lo hubiera hecho. Quería arrancar cada mechón que oía a mi corazón romperse, y después darme con la cabeza contra la pared.

‘El no era tan bueno después de todo — ’ Ramón se calló momentáneamente, dando empuque a sus palabras. ‘Tu pálido afeminado no sabía ni siquiera cómo luchar — como un hombre.’ Empujó sus labios contra los míos.

Una piedra se hundió en mi útero. ‘Tú, canalla, bestia — ¡*hayop!* Mordí sus labios y le di una patada en la ingle, y entonces arremetí a diestro y siniestro con mis trenzas de negro y rojo, gritando, ¡canalla, canalla, canalla!

¡*Putang ina!* Intentó esquivar los golpes a la vez que amartillaba su rifle y gritaba a sus hombres. Los golpes afloraban en su cara y en sus brazos, la maldición de mis luces rojas.

‘Así que tu eres el mejor? Oh, si, aprieta el gatillo, Ramón, valiente,’ me rei con desdén, agarrando el látigo de mi pelo, mis ojos borrosos y ardiendo de escozor.

‘Ah, lloras después de todo, Mujer Pelo-Pez,’ el muchacho soldado sonrió con satisfacción, apoyando deliberadamente su arma según se me acercaba. ‘Pero necesitaremos entereza para este trabajo, ¿no?’ Su voz era peligrosamente tierna.

Levanté mi látigo una vez más. Sus hombres amartillaron sus rifles. Dejé caer mi pelo.

‘En el fondo de su corazón, ella sabe que lo hará — ¿verdad?’ Ramón deshilo mi pelo despacio, deleitándose mientras lo esparcía en forma de red, ya que, según sospechaba, esa era la primera vez que alguien que no fuera Tony y los muertos había tocado mi pelo. Los hombres contemplaron su profanación con absurdo respeto, y las luciérnagas volvieron, rodeando sus armas, dibujando halos.

Marchamos en lúgubre procesión hasta el río, flanqueados por un montón de luces voladoras, los soldados sujetando mi pelo como la cola de una novia. De nuevo, recordé sus labios y las piedras preciosas sobre mi espalda y el río en mi pelvis y su pez de hierba de limón nadando dentro del vientre de una muchacha muerta cuya cara y pezones estaban creciendo de nuevo, y su abuela frotando sus pies como si tratando de recordar algo, y el suave montículo de tierra induciendo con una canción a los huesos de diez años al sueño.

Así la traición de la memoria, mientras los soldados se maravillaban de cómo mi pelo crecía y crecía en sus manos. Ya conocían el secreto. Sabían que, una vez que me zambullera en las aguas dulces con sabor a hierba de limón, nunca dejaría mi corazón en la orilla de nuevo.

MERLINDA BOBIS AND DOLORES HERRERO

Sensing and Sensibility: The Late Ripple of Colonisation?

A Conversation between Author and Translator

history hurts my hair (Bobis 1999 11)
la historia hiere mi pelo
pigpapaduso kan nakaaging istorya an sakuyang buhok

MERLINDA:

In English, then in Spanish, and in Bikol, this is a line from Estrella, the woman with twelve-metre hair in my short story ‘Fish-Hair Woman’. This story is based on the militarisation of my grandmother’s village in the 1987–1989 total war waged by the Philippine government against communist insurgency in the Bikol region. The Fish-Hair Woman uses her hair to fish out corpses, victims of war, from the river that transforms each time a body is thrown into the water —

A river sweet with lemon grass and breathing fireflies — how could you believe such a tale? (10)

Un río dulce con hierba de limón y luciérnagas suspirantes — ¿cómo puedes creer semejante historia?

The story opens with the Fish-Hair Woman being picked up by the soldiers to fish out another corpse from the river. This time she suspects it is her lover, the Australian journalist Tony McIntyre —

So when they asked me to come with them to fish out the lemon grass scent and give them back the river, the one that is sweetened only by the hills [...] every strand of my hair heard my heart break. (11)

Así que cuando me pidieron que les acompañara para pescar el aroma de hierba de limón y devolverles el río, el que tan sólo está endulzado por las colinas [...] todos los mechones de mi pelo oían cómo mi corazón se rompía.

‘Pain reduces a person to visceral bodiliness’, writes anthropologist and novelist Michael Jackson. ‘One becomes merely a vulnerable bodyself that either functions or does not, that either lives or dies, depending on forces outside one’s control, and despite one’s worth, wealth, or cultural identity. Pain makes questions of identity trivial’ (118).

But not in this conversation. Cultural identity, especially its language and history, is crucial to this article that will examine the collaborative translation

between myself, the author, and Dolores, the translator, of the short story 'Fish-Hair Woman' from English to Spanish — while noting that my English text is not necessarily the original version. The story, of course, was first translated from my native Bikolano sensibility and the history of total war and militarism. Both realities are as old as the Philippines' history of colonisation: Spain for nearly 400 years (1521–1898), America for 40 years (1901–1945), then Japan for nearly five years (1941–1945).

The Bikol region has always been a setting of imposed violence and resistance. In a letter to the Viceroy of New Spain, the missionary Fray Martin de Rada (June 1574: see Blair and Robertson 288–94) wrote about how the Spaniards entered the region, which was

the most valiant and best armed of all these islands. Consequently, although they never attacked the Spaniards, still they defended themselves in all their villages and would not surrender unless conquered by force of arms [...] all the villages were entered in the same way, by first summoning them to submit peacefully and to pay tribute immediately unless they wished war. They replied that they would first prove those to whom they were to pay tribute [...] an entrance was made among them by force of arms, and the village was overthrown and whatever was found, pillaged.

(qtd in Gerona 45)

The natives fiercely resisted the conquest, and consequently as de Rada wrote, 'more have perished in that land than in any other yet conquered' (45). The Spaniards conquered Bikol with the cross and the sword, a combination that not only wrecked land and lives, but more insidiously, culture. According to Bikolano historian Danilo Gerona,

Archaeological facts suggest that this was one of the earliest regions in the Philippines to have a relatively advanced civilization. In fact, when early Asiatic trade began flowing into the Philippines, the region apparently was among the first to enjoy access to exotic Oriental goods.

However, because of the early Spanish chroniclers' narrow and biased cultural horizon the thousand of years of Bicol civilization receded to oblivion. Most painful is the fact that many people were made to believe that civilization only arrived with the Spaniards in 1569. (6)

Rich in gold, the region was heavily hispanised. The colonial mark is felt to this day in the Catholic zeal of Bikolanos and the Spanish language woven into the native tongue: Bikol or Bikolano, an Austronesian language and a sub-branch of Malayo-Polynesian languages. Consider these quotes on language and education from Philippine historian Teodoro Agoncillo (1969), in the context of Spanish colonisation:

[...] instead of teaching the language to the people, as required by several royal decrees, [the friars] studied the native languages and preached and wrote religious tracts in them. In any artistic endeavour, native achievements were impregnated with the religious element, for the Spanish friars saw to it that Catholicism dominated the life of the community. (54)

The Spaniards, it has been truly said, founded colleges and universities, the oldest being what is now the University of Santo Tomas founded in 1611, but what has been left unsaid is that those educational institutions were not for the natives but for the orphans of Spanish colonists and for the children of the peninsular Spaniards and the creoles, the latter being called *Filipinos* during the Spanish colonial regime [...] University education was opened to the natives [eventually], resulting in the rise of the intelligentsia class which the Spaniards, particularly the friars, feared might start and agitate for reforms and, ultimately, for independence. (58; original emphasis)

[Because of] the fear of an educated elite [...] Spanish colonial authorities, goaded by the friars, discouraged the natives from learning Spanish [...]. (58)

One can argue then that our current collaborative translation is both subversive and problematic: centuries later, a Filipino writer and a Spanish translator harness Spanish for literary ends — this is writing back to the empire — but the process also returns us to the language and sensibility of the Spanish coloniser (Filipino collaborators were executed during the Philippine revolution against Spain). But that was ages ago, and ours is now a transnational collaboration where both cultures have equal agency. We can shrug off this history. This position is equally problematic. Invoking transnationalism returns us to the earlier transnational enterprise, colonisation. Even more problematic, perhaps especially to Filipino nationalists, is the fact that I have always sensed my sensibility's close affinity with literatures of Hispanic/Latin-American origins. Is this literary affinity a late ripple of colonisation? On reading my short stories for the first time, Dolores sensed them as so 'familiar', evoking Spanish writers. This recognition may well reinforce that late ripple, now a liminal space, which we have harnessed towards a productive-subversive cultural production, where the creative arc is both disruptive and expansive.

DOLORES:

I became acquainted with Merlinda Bobis's work nine years ago, when I read her collection of short stories, *White Turtle*. I must confess that reading that collection was quite an extraordinary experience. The short stories were so fresh, so different from many other things I had read before (especially in the field of Australian literature), but at the same time they sounded so enigmatically familiar. They dealt with a different culture, and thus with an apparently different sensibility. Yet, in spite of all differences, they reminded me of Spanish poets such as García Lorca, Miguel Hernández, Rafael Alberti, and also of Latin American magical realist writers such as Borges and García Márquez, authors who had played such a prominent role in the formative years of my youth, who had paved the way for an innovative and rather more interesting and eclectic kind of literature. I can say that reading this collection was like going back home, like entering my own particular 'Third Space', to take Homi Bhabha's well-known expression so familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. When reading 'Fish-Hair Woman', and how history hurt Estrella's hair in particular, one of the voices whose echoes I could clearly hear was that of Miguel Hernández in his well-known elegy, 'Elegía

a la muerte de Ramón Sijé' (*El Rayo que no cesa*, 1936), which he wrote after the death of one of his dearest friends.

[...]
 daré tu corazón por alimento.
 Tanto dolor se agrupa en mi costado,
 Que por doler me duele hasta el aliento. (ll. 7–9)

[...]
 (I will feed on your heart.
 There is so much pain inside
 that every single part of my body hurts, even my breath)

Merlinda and I exchanged quite a few stimulating emails over a number of years, and finally met in 2008, when she kindly accepted my invitation to be one of the keynote speakers at the International Conference on Ethics, Trauma and Literature that I organised in Spain. Two years later, we decided to work together in Australia in order to explore the transnational dimension of her work as particularly shown in her short story 'Fish-Hair Woman', and to translate it into Spanish. During the course of our collaboration I realised that, although she was familiar with many Spanish authors, she had never heard of Miguel Hernández, nor of the poem I mentioned before. Yet, the sensibility and the wording were almost the same, and this was only one example. We both found these echoes fascinating, this late and incredibly productive ripple of colonisation (?), and soon decided to embark on the exploration of the infinite possibilities of this liminal space, which clearly transcended the realm of sheer postcoloniality.

As is well known, liminality (from the Latin word *limen*, meaning 'a threshold') has often been defined as a psychological or metaphysical subjective, conscious state of being on the threshold of or between different existential planes. Although liminal first appeared in publication in the field of psychology in 1884, the idea was introduced in the field of anthropology in 1909 by Arnold Van Gennep in his seminal work, *Les rites de passage*. Yet it was not until the second half of the twentieth century that the term gained popularity through the writings of Victor Turner. Turner first introduced his interpretation of liminality in 1967, drawing on Van Gennep's three-part structure for rites of passage (1. separation; 2. liminal period; 3. reassimilation). He focused entirely on the middle stage, the so-called transitional or liminal stage, and affirmed that 'the subject of passage ritual is, in the liminal period, structurally, if not physically, 'invisible' (1967 95). The liminal is described as a period of transition, as a threshold state of ambiguity, openness and indeterminacy, and it is only after going through this process that one may enter into new forms of identity and relationship, to rejoin again the culture one initially belonged to.

Turner argues that liminal individuals are treated as outsiders, and are therefore regarded as dangerous to those who have not undergone the liminal period. Moreover, liminal individuals have nothing: 'no status, insignia, secular clothing,

rank, kinship position, nothing to demarcate them structurally from their fellows' (1967 98). The group of liminal individuals is not a typical social hierarchy but a 'communitas', a communal group in which all are equal. Turner uses the Latin term *communitas* to express this notion of anti-structure, and refers to social structure and 'communitas' as 'two major "models" for human interrelatedness' (1969 96). This is how he defines these two models:

The first is of society as a structured, differentiated, and often hierarchical system of politico-legal-economic positions with many types of evaluation, separating men in terms of *more or less*. The second, which emerges recognizably in the liminal period, is of society as an unstructured or rudimentarily structured and relatively undifferentiated *comitatus*, community, or even communion of equal individuals who submit together to the general authority of the ritual elders. (1969 96 [original emphasis])

This latter model of 'communitas' has a number of cultural manifestations, of which liminality (to be in between) is only one. The other two are: marginality (to be on the edges); and inferiority (to be beneath). However, although Turner strives to give examples of each of them, the differences are not always clear-cut, and some overlapping is always inevitable. For Turner the experience of liminality is essential to understand the true nature of community. The liminal is not opposite to, but the necessary counterpart to, individuality and identity. By getting rid of the usual definitions by which society assigns power and status, entrance into the liminal not only allows individuals to change who they are in relationship to society, but also offers them a chance to be aware of their oneness with the community as a whole.

Judging from all that has been said so far, it would be no exaggeration to assert that the notion of liminality can be used to represent the writer's and, by extension the translator's, task and experience in the world, all the more so when they are, to take Salman Rushdie's well-known expression, 'translated persons'; that is, people who have been carried across several languages and cultures, and who necessarily straddle them in their daily work and existence. It is their attention to what lies outside the order of ordinary life, their immersion in the life of multiple worlds, and their willingness to be inhabited by and speak for others that mainly characterise their work. Moreover, whereas for most members of a cultural community the liminal is a temporary point of transition, for the writer or translator, the liminal could be said to become their only possible dwelling place, their home.

Like Merlinda herself who, having been born in the triply colonised Philippines and now living in Australia, interlaces several localities/nationalities and their respective languages and cultures in an artistic global imagined space, Estrella, the main character in 'Fish-Hair Woman', wonderfully encapsulates the aforementioned ideas. A most important member of her community, but also alien to it due to her subversive monstrosity, she must constantly inhabit the liminal space that alone allows her to mediate between the familiar and the unfamiliar,

reality and magic, love and hate, life and death, earth and water, the villagers and the military, the Philippines and Australia, Bikol and English. Her body, and more particularly her hair, is the site of variegated tensions and contradictory meanings which, to quote Wilson and Dissanayake, 'unsettle the hybridity discourse normative to postcolonial analysis with trenchantly situated readings that stress enduring asymmetries of domination, injustice, racism, class dynamics, and uneven spatial development' (8). Estrella's hair stands for both her people's ultimate encapsulation of death and only desperate hope. Consequently, unlike in many patriarchal/colonial signifying practices in which, Barbara Creed (1993) argues, the womb, and by extension the whole female body, is represented as tomb and accordingly, as the ultimate embodiment of death and abjection, Estrella's hair, like its transnational author, transcends that demeaning homogenising model in order to teem with threads which ever grow in multiple directions. This criss-crosses unequal and discrepant allegiances and inheritances to bring forth what Homi Bhabha calls an 'interstitial' or 'third space' born of the imaginative 'negotiation of incommensurable differences' (1994 218).

MERLINDA:

As a magical realist text, 'Fish-Hair Woman' exists in a liminal space, in the interstice of the magical and the real, subverting the violence of a real war in an actual political setting through the magical, monstrous female body. But unlike Barbara Creed's 'monstrous feminine' that is reduced to abjection, the Fish-Hair Woman subverts her own and her village's abject reality. In fact, my creative conjuring of this magical protagonist was an uncanny subversion that played out in the sensing space of liminality. Ten years after I wrote the short story, I learned about a military strategy used in that total war. Human rights advocate Arnel de Guzman writes:

President Aquino and her US military advisers mapped out a strategy dubbed *Lambat Bitag* (Operation Fishnet-Trap), a Filipino expression that suggests a noose tightening around a victim's neck. *Lambat Bitag* relies on traditional military offensives bolstered by political and psychological warfare that are supposed to pave the way for peace and development. The strategy is not new; it was used by the United States in the Philippine-American War, was used to crush the Huk [peasant] rebellion in the 1950s, and was the mainstay of Marcos-directed counter-insurgency warfare in the 1970s and 1980s.

The victims of the tightening noose are of course meant to be the insurgents, especially the leaders, but since they are so elusive, a broad net with small openings is needed. Casting such a net risks catching innocent fish, but this, reasons the military, would be an acceptable byproduct of war. In regions where the net fails, the entire population (the water) may have to be removed in order to starve the fish. (1991 40)

My fish-net hair of salvation is then an accidental subversion of the deadly military strategy 'Fishnet-Trap', the *Lambat Bitag*. Moreover, the Fish-Hair Woman redeems not only corpses, but also history. Each time she remembers something that 'unsettles her heart', her hair grows a hand span. Even so,

abjection is not effaced; with her ever-growing hair hurting with history, she remains in agonistic liminality between devastation and redemption, abjection and subversion. ‘Agonistic liminality’ is a term from Hamid Naficy’s essay on independent transnational cinema:

The authority of transnationals as filmmaking authors is derived from their position as subjects inhabiting transnational and exilic spaces, where they travel in the slip-zone of fusion and admixture. What results is an agonistic liminality of selfhood and location which is characterized by oscillation between extremes of hailing and haggling. This turns exile and transnationalism into a contentious state of syncretic impurity, intertextuality, even imperfection. They become moments of dialectical vision, of sameness in difference, of continuity in discontinuity, of synchronicity in diachronicity. Emotionally, they are characterized by zeniths of ecstasy and confidence and nadirs of despondency and doubt. Finally, exile and transnationality are highly processual, discursive, and ambivalent. (124)

Naficy could have been describing my creative process of writing the short story in Australia in 1994, while worrying about the protracted violence in my region — as well as my status as a migrant writer, a label that I have dropped because the concept of migrancy suggests a peripheral supplicant always at the mercy of the nation that was left behind, or the nation where the writer has arrived to live in exile. Instead I now see myself as *a* translational-transnational constantly translating and being translated between my Filipino sensibility and the demands of an Australian audience. As a trilingual writer in English-Pilipino-and-Bikol, and a transmedia artist working across diverse literary and performance forms, I now refuse to privilege the notion of exile, and therefore succumb to despondency and abjection. I prefer the ‘transnational imaginary’ that defies structures, and consequently colonisation —

the ‘transnational imaginary’ comprises the *as-yet-unfigured* horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence. (Wilson and Dissanayake 2005 6; [original emphasis])

‘As-yet-unfigured’ and therefore unterritorialised, the transnational imaginary is a liminal space of agency which can serve a decolonising function as it facilitates the creative collision-collaboration of diverse cultural identities — and consequently the infinite imagining and re-imagining of cultural products and culture itself. In the creative process, the transnational imaginary is a sensing space before it is constituted into a fixed sensibility, a fixed culture, a fixed story/discourse. It is disruptive and expansive. It has latitude. It is open to play between Self and Other.

DOLORS:

If understood in these terms, the creative process has a clear ethical agenda. It is the writer’s ethical impulse towards the other, the writer’s openness to it, that ultimately effects a release from the confines of the self. Subjectivity is

therefore regarded, as Andrew Gibson has put it, ‘not merely as radically and definitely incomplete, but as intrinsically a projection towards the future, *un sujet-à-venir*’ (1999 38 [original emphasis]). The writer who conceives the literary imagination as transnational, as a culture-crossing force that transcends all territorial, linguistic, and cultural barriers, advocates, to rely on Gibson’s ideas again (161–65), an ‘ethics of affect’, since s/he is mainly concerned with being affected rather than affecting. Sensibility and reception, two key concepts in the field of literary theory and criticism, are reconsidered from an ethical perspective. Since, according to Gibson, sensibility ‘does not direct itself at an object with the intention of mastering it, but is rather characterised by a mode of openness and attentiveness’, it could be ‘effectively thought of as a capacity for being mastered, a receptiveness which even precedes cognition and makes cognition possible’ (162). The creative text, like art in general, Gibson goes on to argue, does not attempt to embody and illustrate a stable, pre-existing realm of prior values and principles, but rather reveals itself as a complex and unlimited set of relationships, always subject to the game of composition and fission, repetition and difference, which clearly discloses its ethical potential. According to this critic:

It is precisely insofar as it both recognizes and elaborates a constitutive multiplicity that art not only achieves its goal in contemplation, but is redemptive and ethical. For it does involve a better awareness of *la vie des autres*. This awareness, however, is not to be achieved according to the old humanist principle of putting oneself *à la place des autres* [...]. Better awareness lies in a finer sense (and rendering) of the limitless proliferation of worlds and their incommensurability. In striving for such an awareness, too, art not only reflects people back to themselves, but reflects them back as they have never seen themselves, as both actuality and potentiality, person and event, subjectivity and its other. (130 [original emphasis])

To put it differently, it is the unlimited multiplicity at work within the text, or rather, the text’s ultimate liminality, that turns transnational literature into a source of never-ending scenarios and possibilities, into an ultimately ethical project, which consequently exceeds the limits of former reductive postcolonial interpretations. In the short story under analysis, it is Estrella’s capacity to open herself up to absolute otherness that allows her to represent what ultimately transcends the limits of representation, to contract space and time, to become the catalyst that can alone contest and lump together distinct but entangled worlds and cosmovisions. Similarly, her ever-growing hair becomes a tool of reconciliation and resistance that brings to the fore the problems involved in trying to live with multiple identities. In other words, Estrella’s monstrous hair ‘express[es] and encode[s] the melo(drama) of transnational subjectivity’, since it inexorably blurs and negotiates ‘the boundaries between self and other, female and male, inside and outside, homeland and hostland’ (Naficy 128–29), to the point of opening up space for an on-going transformative dialogue across barriers of language, nationality, gender, race and class.

MERLINDA:

‘There is language, there is art, because there is “the other”’, argues literary critic and philosopher George Steiner (137):

The meaning, the existential modes of art, music and literature are functional within the experience of our meeting the other. All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse, is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities. (138)

Meeting the English reader with a Philippine story and sensibility has always been problematic. During my early years in Australia, when I was writing my bilingual epic poem for performance, *Cantata of the Warrior Woman Daragang Magayon*, I was always looking behind my shoulder towards my first home: how do I remain true to its language rhythms? And almost immediately, I was wrenched back to face the reality of the creative enterprise: I am also writing this in English, in Australia. The language divide kept me from writing for a whole year. Finally I recovered from the writer’s block and wrote the epic in two versions, Pilipino (my national language) and English, only after I found a comfortable conceptual template for that meeting of disparate tongues — and disparate heartbeats, so to speak. In an early essay ‘Redreaming the Voice: From Translation to Bilingualism’, I wrote:

The first heart’s tongue is silence. This found concrete voice in the first primal grunt of the prehistoric person. A sound that was eventually finely tuned in different soundstations, thus breeding the different languages. That I am born to a particular soundstation is accidental. It does not deny me birthright to that first primal sound. I am born with the timbre of the first sound. Thus, I am bound by kinship to all the languages it has bred. And when I tune in myself to any soundstation and know it by ear and heart, the language it has bred becomes mine. (1995 33)

This argument was for my own psychological appeasement. The more conscious postcolonial strategies came later, when I began writing my short stories only in English. Writing ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ for Australian publication in the 90s, I had to make sure that the original tongue was not abandoned, even as I tried to translate ‘a foreign experience’ for the reader. True, I fine-tuned the Bikol reality in English: where Bikol words and concepts were used, English translations were always embedded in the sentence. As writer-translator, I had to be the bridge in this transcultural meeting. However, I decided that the Australian reader must meet me halfway on this bridge, which leads to a story that, considering our present and relatively comfortable domicile, is arguably foreign to both of us. Accordingly, my creative choices were also facilitated by a decolonising intent, consciously at work at sentence level. Steiner writes:

A sentence always means more. Even a single word, within the weave of incommensurable connotation, can, and usually does. The informing matrix or context of even a rudimentary, literal proposition — and just what does *literal* mean? — moves outward from specific utterance or notation in ever-widening concentric

and overlapping circles. These comprise the individual, subconsciously quickened language habits and associative field-mappings of the particular speaker or writer.

(82; [original emphasis])

My ripples of ‘language mappings and associative field-mappings’ were not simply subconscious. In the keynote paper that I delivered on ‘Fish-Hair Woman’ for Dolores’s conference, I explain:

With my obsession to write [...] the voices of the village, I was, in fact, constantly working with a sense of the oral-aural. I wanted the reader to return with me to [the village of] Iraya. I wanted their placid air assaulted, rippled with the inflections of my native tongue that is ornate and dense, the storytelling of daily life, and the spontaneous, in-your-face cry of grief of that total war. (2009 11)

The dense lyricism, the emotionally charged sentences, and the unusual syntax of the text were deliberate translations of a place, its bodies, its voices. Listen:

[...] history hurts my hair, did you know that? Remembering is always a bleeding out of memory, like pulling thread from a vein in the heart, a coagulation so fine, miles of it stretching upwards to the scalp, then sprouting there into the longest strand of red hair. Some face-saving tale to explain my twelve metres of very thick black hair with its streaks of red and hide my history. (1999 11)

Writing this, I wanted to make strange the English language, therefore stylistically foregrounding my native sensibility and its attendant history. Here, I am evoking Viktor Shklovsky’s defamiliarisation technique not primarily as an aesthetic device but as a decolonising strategy. He argues:

Habitualization devours works, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war. [...] art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects *unfamiliar*, to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*

(1965 12 [original emphasis])

While Shklovsky can be referenced in the conjuring of the Fish-Hair Woman in a village at war, for me, the real war itself is as important as the artfulness of the magical protagonist. For aesthetics, the long, dense sentences are meant to evoke her lengthening hair, which is a metaphor for the lengthening stories of violence in the village; for a decolonising politics, the emotionally charged and overwrought sentences are intended to defy the habitualised expectations of the finely crafted English sentence, and the emotionally checked English sensibility — which can be so colonising if you are from a Non-English-speaking-background publishing in a prevalently Anglo culture. Note Pablo Neruda’s poem ‘Oda a la crítica’, which critiques his own critics:

Then came the critics: one deaf
and one gifted with tongues,

and others and others:
 the blind and the hundred-eyed,
 the elegant ones
 in red pumps and carnations,
 others decently clad
 like cadavers ...
 [...]
 others were English,
 just English ... (30)

In Australia, my writing has often been described as ‘densely lyrical, with big emotions, and, at worse, sentimental’. On the transcultural bridge, my hoped-for meeting is thereby arrested. I begin to wonder: is the Anglophone sensibility the sole basis for experiencing a Filipino landscape and voice? According to Susan Sontag, ‘[t]o translate is still to lead something across a gap, to make something go to where it is not. (340). In translating that Bikol total war by unsettling the stylistic expectations of the Anglo ear, I was hoping that this ear would ‘go to where it is not’. Can we remain in our comfortably familiar and peaceful grounds [and sentences] — while entering a war? Sontag argues that:

Translation is about differentness. A way of coping with, and ameliorating, and yes, denying difference — even if, as my story illustrates, it is also a way of asserting differentness. (339)

Her story is about how she and a team of Sarajevo artists translate and stage *Waiting for Godot* in war-torn Sarajevo. She tried to describe this experience back in the United States:

It’s not just that people can’t imagine a war or a siege, or the danger of the fear or the humiliation. More: they simply can’t imagine that degree of differentness from their own lives and comforts, from their understandable sense — understandable, for it’s based on their own experience — that the world isn’t such a really terrible place.

They can’t imagine that. It must be translated for them. (339)

To this I add: translated for them in their own sensibility, emotional parameters, and sentence construction. For all the postcolonial discourses of Western literary theory, does the West wish to truly meet the Other — on equal ground? I return to George Steiner who writes that, ‘[t]he experiencing of created form is a meeting between freedoms’ (152). Scientists Wilson Poon and Tom Mcleish — their disciplines (Physics and Astronomy) so Other from the humanities — did meet Steiner with welcoming precision, and ‘the shock of relevance’ to their own practice. They write that Steiner’s ‘bold, positive assertion’ is about a meeting

between the freedom of creation — ‘the sonata, the painting, could very well *not* be’ [152], and the freedom of reception — ‘we are utterly free not to receive [...] [when we are] face to face with the presence of offered meaning’ [152–53] or we are free to make the ‘gamble of welcome [...] when freedom knocks’ [156]. Some do make the gamble, and extend the courtesy of welcome to a work of artistic creation. According to Steiner, the ‘discipline of courtesy’ [155] consists of seeking to hear the language

of the stranger accurately, 'lexical *cortesía*' [157] and being sensitive to 'syntax, to the grammars which are the sinew of articulate forms' [158]. When we do that, we discover that 'we have met before' [180]. (1999 5 [original emphasis])

As early as 2004, Dolores and I met through our creative and scholarly texts, and sensed that we had met before. A little tingle of recognition, which kept happening through our collaborative translation of 'Fish-Hair Woman' in August 2010.

DOLORES:

I wrote the first draft translation of 'Fish-Hair Woman' on my own, which was quite a challenging and difficult task. An ethical translation should always be an expansive transformation of the original, and an ethical translator should always serve the text, that is, show respect for the original, which by no means implies that s/he should produce a blind translation, one that does not take into account the process, the hidden meanings of words. A holistic approach is always necessary. I had to try to see the whole picture, and look for dynamic equivalents in the Spanish language and culture, like when I chose the word 'pícaro' for 'tricky' to convey the idea of both 'unpredictable' and 'up to mischief', as was meant in the original. I often had to change the word order and substitute a whole long sentence in Spanish for a rather more short and precise expression in English. I must confess that, at times, it was hard to strike a balance. As is well known, sentence structures are important, since our cognitive parameters determine the way we see and interpret the world. Over and above everything, though, I had to hit the note that embodied Estrella's voice. Many factors are to be taken into account when translating; the translator must make her/his own decisions, and voice often determines most of them. To give but one example, for hair I chose 'pelo' instead of 'cabello', because the former belongs in a rather more popular register, which better suited Estrella's character and rural background. A good translation can never be mechanical, that is why some professional translators prefer the term transliterature to that of translation. Translation is more than pinning down the meaning and grasping the words that fit the specific cultural context. More importantly, translation is a sensing of what cannot be pinned down by language; it is also sensing the liminal.

When I went to Wollongong, Merlinda and I reviewed the translation side-by-side. This translation has been a collaborative process, which is a rare privilege. Moreover, in the transnational imaginary with its liminal ripples of disruption and expansion, we often found that the stories, emotions and sensations, and even syntax from our respective homes, kept meeting again and again, just like both of us, who have always felt that we have been meeting even before we physically met. Sometimes, I could not explain to Merlinda my choices: why did I sometimes translate 'miles' into 'kilómetros' and some other times into 'millas'? The context — and the text — find the words. Actually, when I read my Spanish draft with Merlinda, better words came to my mind, whereas when I only had the English text in front of me, I often felt sort of blocked. Sometimes you

cannot quite explain the liminal workings of language. If you cannot explain the workings of language within your own singular culture, how can you explain the workings of a language that is a product of colonisation? This means that there are more liminal spaces, gaps, slippages when working with language in the context of (post)colonisation, as in this translation enterprise, so full of surprises for both of us. I will give two examples. Once Merlinda read my Spanish translation, she all of a sudden heard in 'Fish-Hair Woman' the resonances of Lorca's 'Romance Sonámbulo'/'Somnambular Ballad' — from his well-known *Romancero Gitano/Gypsy Ballads* (1924–27) — which she had never intended: the same repeated question '¿Dónde está?'/ 'Where is she?', the same recurrent use of hair and green as a symbol of death ('pelo verde'/'green uniforms'). Some other times, this collaborative revision disclosed some interesting cultural variances, like when we discovered how different the meaning of the word 'sutil' is in Bikol and Spanish. Whereas 'sutil' in Bikol means 'naughty, stubborn, difficult', in Spanish it conveys the positive idea of 'subtle, nicely refined and sophisticated'. Words change when being carried across from one culture to another, and it is the translator's task to be well aware of these variations to avoid dangerous misunderstandings and prevent cohesion from interfering with coherence.

MERLINDA:

Discovering the liminal ripples of disruption and expansion: this was the gift of our translation process, which moved from a postcolonial to a transnational enterprise. We found moments of dissonance, which, I argue, are the Bikols' postcolonial subversions of Spanish words and concepts that had woven themselves into the local language and sensibility. The Bikolano either revised the Spanish word to suit the native tongue or revised its meaning to adapt it to local experience. But revision was not necessary as regards emotional intensity or dense lyricism. These were clear resonances between the two sensibilities, which I surmise are not consequences of colonisation. Of course, problematising colonisation was crucial in this translation process; one cannot move forward without tackling colonial history. But it was just as crucial for us to harness not only both cultures, but also both lived experiences on equal ground in intersubjective play. No, this is not an argument for a happy transnationality, but for balance. Fixating on postcolonial alterity, we would have missed the resonances — the relational Self-and-Other — especially in the fact that both Dolores and I have known militarism. They had Franco, we had Marcos. We both know the fear inspired by men in green uniforms. History hurts both our hair — in different circumstances.

'Pain reduces a person to visceral bodiliness [...] Pain makes questions of identity trivial' (118), again to quote Michael Jackson. The individual suffering is the acute human imperative, more than culture. Jackson problematises 'identity terms and collective nouns such as culture, nation, race or tribe' and 'all epistemology' or 'any discursive strategy', as they 'seek to convert subjects of experience into objects of knowledge' and are 'inevitably reductive' (125). He

writes: 'I insist that culture be seen as an idiom or vehicle of intersubjective life, but not its foundation or final cause' (125).

Like the writing of 'Fish-Hair Woman', which navigated multiple subjectivities resisting and relating with each other, this translation and transnational enterprise — and, in fact, this dialogic essay — has employed culture and cultural production as 'a vehicle of intersubjective life'. The process is an infinite interplay of Self and Other, where the lived experience cannot simply be reduced to or railroaded by epistemology. Note how the title of this paper is a question premised on ripples. The conversations, and the living, must continue to disrupt and expand all human engagement.

DOLORES:

'Fish-Hair Woman' is much more than a local story, since it is also part of the big global picture. A close analysis of this short story reveals complex patterns of assimilation and resistance, which become rather more enticing and obvious when accomplishing its translation into Spanish, the language of the former colonisers, which, paradoxically enough, stands for oppression and alienation, but also for a very specific empowering sensibility. By writing such a dialogic and multi-layered text, Merlinda has managed to embody the push and pull between different cultures and languages, but also and more importantly, to transcend these barriers. As I argued in the conclusion of a previous essay of mine (2007), for Merlinda, it is in this liminal space that 'we can speak of Others and Ourselves. And by exploring this hybridity, this Third Space, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of ourselves (Bhabha 1988 8)'. The subject, and all the more so the writer/translator, is in constant dialogue and transformation. The multiple histories that circulate in different societies overlap, intersect and compete with one another. They can be neither fused into a singular national (or any other kind of) narrative nor completely separated from one another or from their own particular contexts. Hence the need to create ethical discourses that incorporate the stories, desires and frustrations of the multitude of people who make up this global *communitas*. As Jahan Ramazani warns us:

If criticism is to be alert to both globalization and to any particular [...] text in its literal meaning of a woven thing, with sometimes contending and overlapping discourses, forms, techniques, and ideologies, it might look instead to dialogic or enmeshment models, attuned to the 'growing extensity, intensity, and velocity of global interactions' and the 'deepening enmeshment of the local and global'. Such models involve both homogenization and heterogenization, both standardization and resistant diversification. (9)

Transnational paradigms should be developed, since this is the only way in which univocal and oppressive ideologies (patriarchal, colonial) can be dismantled, and reductive postcolonial assumptions transcended, so that cross-cultural dynamics become the engines of shared authority and contemporary literary development and innovation, and thus of mutual tolerance, understanding and care.

MERLINDA:

'Fish-Hair Woman' is now a novel, coming out in 2012, and a play, *River, River*, which I performed for Dolores's conference in Spain, and in the US. To conclude this meeting between writer and translator, we offer a recently updated excerpt from the play, which transcends the original narrative premise: from the body hurting because of remembering to the hurt transforming in another plane, another language — a ripple is inevitably far reaching.

The ache in my scalp
 El dolor en mi cabellera
 Think of flowers ...
 Piensa en las flores
 The trick of memory ...
 Los trucos de la memoria
 Think of blooming ...
 Piensa en el florecer
 The betrayal of nerves
 Los nervios que traicionan
 At the roots of my hair
 En la raíz de mi pelo
 Think of fishes ...
 Piensa en los peces
 Think of fishes ... sira ...

 Rumduma an mga sira ...
 Acuérdate de los peces
 Rumduma an mga bayong ...
 Acuérdate de los pájaros
 Rumduma an mga bayong.

 Remember the fishes, the birds
 Acuérdate de los peces, de los pájaros
 Rumduma an mga sira, mga bayong ...

WORKS CITED

- Agoncillo, Teodoro 1969, *The History of the Philippines*, Mentor Books, The New American Library, Inc, New York.
- Bhabha, Homi 1988, 'The Commitment to Theory', *New Formations*, 5, pp. 5–23.
- 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, London and New York.
- (1990) 1998, 'The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, Lawrence and Wishart, London, pp. 207–221.
- Blair, Emma Helen and James Alexander Robertson, eds. 1903–1909, *The Philippine Islands: 1493–1898*, vol. 34, Arthur H. Clark Co., Cleveland.
- Bobis, Merlinda 1995, 'Redreaming the Voice: From Translation to Bilingualism', *Refractions: Asian/Australian Writing. Rubicon: Journal of the Centre for Research in Cultural Communication*, eds. Wenche Ommundsen and

- Marian Boreland, Faculty of Arts, Deakin University, Geelong, pp. 24–36.
- 1999, 'Fish-Hair Woman', *White Turtle*, Spinifex, North Melbourne, pp. 10–23.
- 2008, 'Passion to Pasyon: Playing Militarism', Keynote paper at the Conference 'Between the Urge to Know and the Need to Deny: Ethics and Trauma in Contemporary Narrative in English', held in Jaca, Universidad de Zaragoza, Spain, March 26–28, 2008.
- Creed, Barbara 1993, *The Monstrous Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*, Routledge, London and New York.
- De Guzman, Arnel and Tito Craige 1991, 'Counter-insurgency War in the Philippines and the Role of the US', *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars*, vol. 23, pp. 38–47.
- García Lorca, Federico 1994, *Poema del Cante Jondo/ Romancero Gitano*, Altaya, Barcelona.
- Gerona, Danilo 1988, *From Epic to History: A Brief Introduction to Bicol History*, Ateneo de Naga, Philippines.
- Gibson, Andrew 1999, *Ethics, Postmodernity and the Novel: From Leavis to Levinas*, Routledge, London and New York.
- Hernández, Miguel n.d., *Miguel Hernández. Antología*, ed. Jesús García Sánchez, Visor Libros, Madrid.
- Herrero, M. Dolores 2007, 'Merlinda Bobis's Poem-Plays: Reading Ethics and Identity Across Cultures', *Portal: Journal of Interdisciplinary International Studies*, 4.1, on-line,
- Jackson, Michael 2006, *Politics of Storytelling: Violence, Transgression and Intersubjectivity*, Museum Tusculanum Press, University of Copenhagen, Denmark.
- Naficy, Hamid (1996) 2005, 'Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre', *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, eds. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, Duke UP, Durham and London, pp. 119–44.
- Neruda, Pablo 1961, 'Oda la critica', *Selected Poems of Pablo Neruda*, ed. Ben Belitt, Grove Weidenfield, New York, p. 30.
- Poon, Wilson and Tom McLeish 1999, '"Real Presences: Two Scientists" Response to George Steiner', *Theology*, vol. 102, pp. 169–76, online, <http://www2.ph.ed.ac.uk/~wckp/steiner.pdf>, accessed October 2010, pp. 1–11.
- Ramazani, Jahan 2009, *A Transnational Poetics*, U of Chicago P, Chicago and London.
- Shklovsky, Viktor 1965, 'Art as Technique', *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reiss, U of Nebraska P, Lincoln, pp. 3–24.
- Sontag, Susan 2001, *Where the Stress Falls*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York.
- Steiner, George 1991, *Real Presences*, U of Chicago P, Chicago.

- Turner, Victor 1967, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY and London.
- 1969, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, Cornell UP, Ithaca, NY and London.
- van Gennep, Arnold (1909) 1960, *The Rites of Passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee, U of Chicago P, Chicago.
- Wilson, Rob and Wimal Dissanayake (1996) 2005, 'Introduction: Tracking the Global/Local', *Global/ Local. Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, Duke UP, Durham and London, pp. 1–18.

ABSTRACTS

SOHAIMI ABDUL AZIZ

‘The Development of the Popular Malay Cult Novel’

The cult novel has attracted a large following of loyal and fanatical fans and supporters. Malay authors of the cult novel write in a variety of popular sub-genres such as action-venture, crime, detective, fantasy, horror, mystery, romance and science fiction. A shift towards popular culture in Malaysian society and increased digital literacy among young readers has had a tremendous impact on the growth of the Malay cult novel. The new media is an important contributing factor in this growth. This article discusses the development and impact of this phenomenon in Malaysia, taking the popular writer, Ramlee Awang Mursyid, as a case study.

MERLINDA BOBIS & DOLORES HERRERO

‘Sensing and Sensibility: The Late Ripple of Colonisation?’

The Philippines was colonised by Spain for nearly four hundred years (1521–1898), then by America for forty years (1901–1945). As a writer primarily in English, Merlinda Bobis has always ‘sensed’ that her sensibility has greater affinity with literatures of Hispanic/Latin-American rather than of English/American origins. Is this literary affinity a late ripple of colonisation? On reading Bobis’s short stories for the first time, Herrero sensed them as ‘so familiar’, evoking Spanish writers. This recognition may well reinforce that late ripple, now a liminal space for productive-subversive cultural production, where the creative arc is both disruptive and expansive. Bobis and Herrero explore this liminal space by collaboratively examining and translating (from English to Spanish) Bobis’s short story ‘Fish-Hair Woman’, while referencing its writing as, in fact, the earlier process of ‘translation’ of a Philippine story of militarism into an English text. They argue that these processes not only employ decolonising strategies, but also extend beyond the postcolonial into a transnational enterprise.

DOLORES HERRERO

‘Merlinda Bobis’s *Banana Heart Summer*: Recipes to Work Through Trauma and Appease the Human Heart’s Everlasting Hunger’

Banana Heart Summer (2005) is a truly original novel. What at first seems to be a collection of exotic recipes turns out to be a touching, funny and elegiac story. The myth of the banana heart inspires twelve-year-old Nenita, who will try to find the perfect balance between love and anger, to appease her family’s hunger and, which is even more important, to win her violent mother’s love. As she cooks and eats, or dreams of cooking and eating, other love stories unravel in Remedios Street, the street she lives in, significantly placed between an active volcano and

a Catholic church. In this paper I analyse the way in which the different symbols that the novel uses, food being one of the most important, contribute to giving it a most original and coherent structure, and also to draw the reader's attention towards some of the most outstanding messages that the novel seems to put forward, namely, the need for love and dialogue between different individuals and cultures, and for a multicultural and rather more cohesive model to be advocated in contemporary societies.

RUZY SULIZA HASHIM AND SHAHIZAH ISMAIL HAMDAN

'Facets of Women in Malay Romance Fiction'

In this essay, we compare two kinds of Malay fiction to show facets of women in selected Malay romance fiction. On the one hand, we analyse 'serious' Malay novels and their depictions of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, we also scrutinise popular Malay novels which seem to enjoy a wide reading audience. These works, however, share a common feature. They portray Malaysian women juggling the demands of their careers with personal relationships. While the closure is almost always the successful union of the heroine with the man of her choice, the events leading to this happy state are often tortuous, providing some insights into issues related to gender stereotypes. Malaysian women have been shown to outperform men in tertiary education generally, and they have also benefited from access to a wide range of professions, even those which have been perceived as dominated by men. Yet, women in these novels are still caught between the competing demands to be strong and independent while retaining their femininity. To what extent they negotiate these demands and whether or not they are shown to be successful in balancing the professional domain and the home front will be highlighted in the course of this article.

BOITRAN HUYNH-BEATTIE

'Less Seen Art, Made by Vietnamese-Australian Artists'

The fall of Saigon in 1975 witnessed an exodus that scattered Vietnamese refugees throughout the globe. Australia has a thriving Vietnamese community that contributes diversely to the national social fabric. However, on the subject of art (and other cultural forms), the community's leadership tends to adopt a political perspective of polarity and in some cases with emotional fascism. This article sheds some light onto art made by five Vietnamese Australian artists, whose visions are democratic, humanitarian, socially responsible and often satirical. These characteristics can be defined as shared Australian values as observed and portrayed by: My Le Thi, Mai Nguyen-Long, Hoang Tran Nguyen, Garry Trinh and Khue Nguyen. Vietnamese-Australian artists do not have a supportive network of commercial and national galleries promoting their cause, as seen in some other Asian Australian communities. One is left to ponder whether the sensitive politics within the Vietnamese-Australian community curb progress in this area.

MICHAEL JACKLIN

‘Southeast Asian Writing in Australia: The Case of Vietnamese Writing’

In recent years, Vietnamese-Australian experiences and stories have had greater opportunity to reach Australian readers and viewers, with a growing number of works in English now circulating, including autobiographies, films, anthologies and exhibitions. Literary work in Vietnamese produced by writers in Australia, however, rarely has the chance to move beyond the Vietnamese-reading community. As the most populous of all the Southeast Asian diasporic or migrant groups in Australia, it is not surprising that novels, short stories, essays, poetry and autobiographies are written in Vietnamese and circulate amongst readers of Vietnamese across Australia. Yet this literary activity has gone almost unrecognised by Australian literary scholars writing in English. In this article, I draw on research for the AustLit database conducted by myself and Boitran Huynh-Beattie to bring a part of Australia’s Vietnamese writing into focus. In particular, the poetry of Uyên Nguyên and Trần Đình Lương provide a basis for commentary upon experiences of displacement and loss experienced by Vietnamese-Australians, as well as raising questions regarding the relationship between diasporic writing and the literature of the host nation.

RODNEY C. JUBILADO

‘On Cultural Fluidity: The Sama-Bajau of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas’

The Sama-Bajau is an indigenous group of Austronesians residing in the stretches of Sulu-Sulawesi Seas and beyond. Their community is comprised of a diverse group of people connected by the sea and the myths, rituals and dances which they carry beyond their ancestral homeland. For the Sama-Bajau, their point of reference is the sea, the sea current, and the other seas beyond the horizon. Although scholars have argued that these groups of people are basically one from an historical perspective, a growing consciousness of political and economic boundaries is giving rise to a sense of separateness among the groups themselves that belies the evidence of a shared culture. This essay presents some aspects of the cultural fabric that binds and unifies these diverse peoples, focussing on those who reside in the Sulu Archipelago, The Philippines and in Sabah, Malaysia.

SHAKILA ABDUL MANAN

‘Going against the Grain: Postcolonial Writings and Creative Performance in Malaysia’

In Malaysia, freedom of expression is curtailed by a number of draconian and repressive laws. However, this does not deter some of Malaysia’s foremost postcolonial writers from boldly utilising whatever limited space is given to them to dismantle accepted notions of gender, ethnicity and nation in order to articulate

alternative views and visions through their creative writings. These are also the endeavours of particular local Arts groups such as Ombak-Ombak ARTStudio that have explored the hybrid identities, linguistic and cultural syncretism — a legacy of colonialism — through staging children's street performances. With this in mind, it is the aim of this article to show how postcolonial literature and the creative arts have attempted to question the above-mentioned notions in order to reveal the complexities assailing a postcolonial multicultural country such as Malaysia and its attempts to achieve its own sense of national and cultural identity. To realise this objective, this article examines Che Husna Azhari's 'Ustazah Inayah', Lloyd Fernando's *Green is the Colour* and two children's street performances titled *Hen or Rooster* and *Ronggeng Merdeka*.

ROBYN MORRIS

'Relations of Difference: Asianness, Indigeneity and Whiteness in Simone Lazaroo's Fiction'

Simone Lazaroo's fiction is important in discussions of Australian identity formation for its exploration of acculturated representations of both Asianness and Indigeneity. Her body of work brings to visibility issues of representation, especially the way race and gender are intertwined as artificial constructions of difference within Australian cultural and historical discourse. This article examines how Lazaroo's novels engage in a triangulated contemporary representational politics through an articulation of 'relations of difference' in which characters of Asian, Indigenous and Anglo ancestry interact and react to racialised and gendered inscriptions of otherness. This article explores how Lazaroo critiques the hyper-visibility and sexualising of the Asian female body by the dominant white, Anglo Australian society and the concomitant erasure of the Indigenous body and culture in stories of nation in *The World Waiting to Be Made* (1994), *The Australian Fiancé* (2000), and *The Travel Writer* (2006). These works signal Lazaroo's ongoing interrogation of the politics of both relations of difference and looking relations.

PAUL SHARRAD

'Sang Kanchil Meets Sime Darby: Drawing New Postcolonial Boundaries in the Asia-Pacific'

This article sketches shifts from postcolonial to diaspora/transnational frameworks and then considers some interactions with ecocriticism. Postcolonial analysis inspects relations between Asia and the Pacific hidden in labels such as 'the Asia Pacific region'. Malaysia's investment in oil palm and logging is one key component, and colonial attitudes to nature and natives in Hugh Clifford's writing are compared to the environmentalist theme in Sharmini Flint's detective fiction.

CHI VU

‘The 1.5 Generation Vietnamese-American Writer as Post-Colonial Translator’

This article explores contemporary transnationalism through the creative texts written by Vietnamese-American 1.5 Generation authors, in order to define the generational impact on this emerging literature. Using post-colonial translation theory, this article examines how these authors’ literary production occurs across a cultural and linguistic gap, which increases the risk of invisibility, stereotyping and linguistic colonisation. In-between two cultures, cognitive systems and languages, authors of the 1.5 Generation are required to perform as ‘translators’ between the mainstream and minority reading cultures. In this role, 1.5 Generation authors such as Lan Cao and Linh Dinh employ creative strategies of resistance; their creative texts engage with the question of ‘who is translating whom and for what purpose?’ This essay examines how these authors’ creative texts perform their interstitial identity in the content as well as the poetics of their works.

MD. SALLEH YAAPAR

‘The Empire Strikes Back: Re-writing Malay History and Identity in Faisal Tehrani’s Novel *1515*’

1515 by Faisal Tehrani is a unique text within contemporary Malay literature. Among recent novels in Malaysia it is one of the most multifaceted narratives, with elements of romance, postcolonial discourse, postmodernism, socio-political criticism, feminism, history, legend, and even fantasy. This essay will discuss *1515* by combining several approaches, namely the postcolonial, postmodern and feminist approaches, with an emphasis on revisionism and alter-native perspectives. The focus is on the discourse of power within the text and the author’s reinterpretation of Malay identity and history. The novel is examined within the context of the author’s utilisation of history, legend, ideology and fantasy, and comparison is made to texts from the traditional Malay literary corpus.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

SOHAIMI ABDUL AZIZ is an Associate Professor at the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. Currently Deputy Dean of Post-graduate Studies and Research in the School of Humanities, he joined the Literature Section of the School of Humanities in 1995 after completing his PhD in Literature from Universiti Sains Malaysia and Temple University of Philadelphia in the US. Sohaimi is an authority on Malaysian literature and culture, specialising in comparative literature, literary theory and criticism, children's literature and cultural studies. He has published nine books on literary criticism and comparative literature and has edited seven books on cultural studies published by Universiti Sains Malaysia.

MERLINDA BOBIS is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong, Australia, and an award-winning writer who has published novels, short stories, poetry books, and plays. Seven of her plays have been performed/produced in Australia, the Philippines, France, Spain, USA, China, Thailand, and the Slovak Republic. Merlinda has also used creative writing as an inroad to theorising. She is currently researching the trans-national imaginary with a partner researcher in Vigo, Spain, and story-making teams in Vigo and Wollongong, Australia. For more information on publications and awards, see <http://www.austlit.edu.au> and the author's website, <http://www.merlindabobis.com.au>

TRẦN LỘC BÌNH is a poet and essayist. He has been a contributor to the literary journals *Viet* and *Tiền Vê*. His poems have been included in the *Tiền Vê Anthology No.1* (2007). A political refugee from Vietnam, he is now living and working in Melbourne.

SHAHIZAH ISMAIL HAMDAN is a senior lecturer in the School of Language Studies and Linguistics at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. Her academic areas of interest include Science Fiction and posthumanism as well as subjectivity and ideology in Literature.

RUZY SULIZA HASHIM is an associate professor of Literature in the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. She is also Head of the Centre for Gender Research. Her book, *Out of the Shadows: Women in Malay Court Narratives* won the National Book Award in 2005.

DOLORES HERRERO is a Senior Lecturer in English and Postcolonial Literatures in the Department of English and German at the University of Zaragoza, Spain. Her research interests are in Cultural, Film and Postcolonial Studies, and Australian and Indian culture in particular. She belongs to a research team headed by Professor Susana Onega, working on trauma and the ethical component in contemporary fiction in English. Dolores has published widely in this area, and co-edited, with Marita Nadal, *Margins in English and American Literature, Film and Culture* (1997). She was the Editor of *Miscelánea: A Journal of English and American Studies* from 1998 till 2006.

NGUYỄN TÔN HIỆT is a poet, essayist and literary commentator. His writings regularly appear in *Tiền Vệ* and *Talawas*, and have been included in the *Tiền Vệ Anthology No.1* (2007) and others. He is also a political polemicist who fiercely criticises the Vietnamese Communist government for its serious violation of human rights. A political refugee from Vietnam, he is now living and working in Sydney.

BOITRAN HUYNH-BEATTIE obtained a PhD in 2005 in art history from the University of Sydney, specialising in Vietnamese art. She has worked with the Australian National University, Melbourne University, University of Wollongong and Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney, on various projects and exhibitions related to Vietnam's Diaspora since 2005. Huynh-Beattie has been awarded a 2011 Asialink grant to carry out her research in Vietnam, 'From Saigon to Sydney: The 20th Century Modernist (1954–75) Saigonesque Art and Vietnamese Australian Heritage'. She is currently documenting Vietnamese literature in Australia for the Australian Literature Resources database.

MICHAEL JACKLIN is a Research Fellow in the School of English Literatures and Philosophy at the University of Wollongong. His research into multilingual Australian literatures contributes to the AustLit database. Other research interests include collaboration in life writing, Indigenous literatures, and literatures of exile and diaspora. His publications have appeared in journals including *Antipodes*, *ARIEL*, *Australian Canadian Studies*, *JASAL*, *Kunapipi*, *Life Writing* and *New Literatures Review*.

RODNEY C. JUBILADO is a Filipino who lectures in the Graduate School of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. He holds a Ph.D. degree in Linguistics from the National University of Malaysia. Rodney teaches General Linguistics, Minimalist Syntax, and Historical Linguistics in the postgraduate programs. His research interests include Austronesian studies, indigenous cultures, endangered languages, typology, and morphosyntax.

SHAKILA ABDUL MANAN is an Associate Professor of English Language Studies in the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. Her main research interests are in the areas of Stylistics, Critical Discourse Analysis and Feminist Studies. Shakila has presented papers at local and international conferences. Her recent publications include two co-edited books: *Higher Education in the Asia-Pacific: Emerging Trends in Teaching and Learning* (2008, USM Publishers) and *Exploring Space: Trends in Literature, Linguistics and Translation* (2008, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK).

ROBYN MORRIS lectures in the English Literatures Program at the University of Wollongong, Australia. Her areas of research interest include race, whiteness, gender, surveillance and the politics of representation. Her focus is contemporary

Australian and Canadian women's writing. Robyn has published widely on the work of writers such as Larissa Lai, Joy Kogawa, Hiromi Goto, Evelyn Lau, Lillian Ng, Simone Lazaroo and Hsu-Ming Teo in articles, book chapters, interviews and reviews. She is the Editor of *Australasian Canadian Studies* and Vice-President of the Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand (ACSANZ).

CHANDRAN NAIR (b. 1945) was educated at the Raffles Institution, Singapore and the University of Singapore in science but went into publishing on graduation and later worked as a book development expert with UNESCO, first in Karachi (1981–1985) and then in Paris (1985–2004). His first two books of poems, *Once the Horsemen and Other poems* (1972) and *after the hard hours, this rain* (1975) were well received and he has co-translated with Malcolm Koh Ho Ping the *Poems and Lyrics of the Last Lord Lee* (the last Emperor of the Southern Tang Dynasty). Chandran won The New Nation Singapore Short Story Writing contest in 1973 with *Leta* and has published his stories in a number of anthologies. His collected poems were published under the title, *reaching for stones*, by Ethos Books Singapore in September 2010. Chandran was founder President of the *Society of Singapore Writers*, and continued as its president from 1976 to 1981.

UYÊN NGUYỄN is a poet and songwriter. He was one of the founding members of *Tập Hạp*, the first Vietnamese-language literary journal in Australia. He has also been a contributor to many Vietnamese literary journals worldwide. His poems have been included in such anthologies as *Hai Mươi Năm Văn Học Việt Nam Hải Ngoại 1975–1995* [Twenty Years of Vietnamese Literature Overseas 1975–1995] (California, 1995); *Selected Works in Vietnamese from the Vietnamese-Australian Writers* (Sydney, 1997), *26 Nhà Thơ Việt Nam đương Đại* [26 Contemporary Vietnamese Poets] (California, 2002), and *Tiền Vệ Anthology No.1* (2007). A political refugee from Vietnam, he is now living and working in Sydney.

MOHAMMAD A. QUAYAM, who has a PhD in English and American literature from Flinders University, South Australia, has been teaching at universities in Malaysia and Singapore since 1993. He has also taught at universities in Bangladesh and the US, and has published 21 books and numerous research articles in various areas of literature. His recent books include: *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Short Stories* (trans. and intro. Mohammad Quayum New Delhi: Macmillan, 2011), *A Rainbow Feast: New Asian Short Stories* (Singapore: Marshall Cavendish, 2010) and *Sharing Borders: Studies in Singaporean-Malaysian Literature* (Singapore: National Library Board and Singapore Arts Council, 2009).

PAUL SHARRAD is Associate Professor in English Literatures at the University of Wollongong, Australia. His specialisations are postcolonial writing and theory, in particular, work in English from India and the Pacific, although he has written as well on Australian, Caribbean, and Southeast Asian. He has books on Raja

Rao, Albert Wendt and on literary history and Indian English fiction and edited the *CRNLE Reviews Journal* and *New Literatures Review* for many years. He currently edits the 'New Literatures' section of *The Year's Work in English Literature* and is on editorial boards of the *Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, *Postcolonial Text*, the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* and *Kunapipi*.

KIRPAL SINGH is a professor and currently director of the Wee Kim Wee Centre at the Singapore Management University where he teaches Creative Writing. Kirpal is a familiar face at numerous international Writers Festivals and Literary conferences and has been invited by some of the world's top universities to read, perform and discuss his work. In recent years he has been labeled a 'creativity guru', especially after the appearance of *Thinking Hats & Coloured Turbans: Creativity Across Cultures* (Prentice-Hall, 2004). Kirpal has two new collections of poems due out this year and in April becomes the first Singaporean to be invited to the famous Austin International Poetry Festival.

PHAN QUỲNH TRÂM is a poet, essayist and translator. Her works have been published regularly on *Tiền Vệ*—the Vietnamese Online Centre for Literature and Arts. Having migrated from Vietnam, she is now living and working in Sydney.

HOÀNG NGỌC-TUẤN is a writer, essayist, poet and translator. He founded and edited the literary journal *Tập Hạp* (1987–1989) and, with Nguyen Hung Quoc, was the co-editor of *Việt*, an important journal that existed from 1998 to 2001. Since 2002, he has been the co-editor of the groundbreaking webzine *Tiền Vệ*, the only Vietnamese literary journal that updates its contents daily. His critical essays, poems and stories have appeared in most overseas Vietnamese literary journals. He has published many books in Vietnamese and English. Besides literature, Hoang Ngoc-Tuan is actively involved in music and theatre as composer, guitarist, playwright and performer.

CHI VU was born in Vietnam and arrived in Australia in 1979 and completed her Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne. In 2000, Chi was awarded an Asialink writer's residency to Vietnam where she wrote *Vietnam: a Psychic Guide*. Her plays have been performed in Melbourne at the North Melbourne Arts House and Footscray Community Arts Centre, and in Sydney at the Sidetrack Theatre and the Sydney Opera House's Studio program. Chi's prose has appeared in anthologies by Random House, Picador, Black Inc as well as *Meanjin*, *The Age* and the *Macquarie PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*.

CYRIL WONG is the author of eight poetry collections, including *Unmarked Treasure* (Firstfruits 2004) and *Oneiros* (Firstfruits 2010). He has also published a volume of short stories, *Let Me Tell You Something About That Night* (Transit Lounge 2009). Cyril edits the online poetry journal, *Softblow*, and his most recent poetry-publication is *Satori Blues* (Softblow Press 2011).

MD. SALLEH YAAPAR is a Professor of Literature in the School of Humanities as well as Director of the USM Press, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang. He was formerly holder of the European Chair of Malay Studies at Leiden University, the Netherlands and is currently Vice-Chairman, Board of Directors, Malaysian Language and Literary Institution (Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Malaysia) and member, Board of Recommendation, Netherlands-Malaysia Association, The Hague. Md. Salleh's area of specialisation is Comparative Literature, Literary Theory and Literature of the Malay World. He has published widely, including in international journals such as *The Muslim World*, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Indonesia and the Malay World*, and *Muslim Education Quarterly*. His books and monographs include *Mysticism and Poetry: A Hermeneutical Reading of the Poems of Amir Hamzah*, the award winning *Ziarah ke Timur* (English version: *Pilgrimage to the Orient*), *Kesusasteraan Bandingan dan Kesusasteraan Asia Tenggara Abad ke-21* (Comparative Literature and Southeast Asian Literature in the 21st Century) and *Cultural Encounter & Religious Engagement in Nurturing World Peace: Lessons from Selected Literary Works and Authors*.

EDITORIAL BOARD

Diana Brydon, Canada Research Chair, Globalization & Cultural Studies, University of Manitoba, Canada.

Isabel Carrera Suárez, Profesora Titular, English and Postcolonial Literatures, University of Oviedo, Spain.

Kee Thuan Chye, playwright, poet & journalist, Malaysia.

Diana Wood Conroy, Professor of Visual Arts, Faculty of Creative Arts, University of Wollongong, Australia.

Margaret Daymond, Professor of English Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa.

Helen Gilbert, Professor of Theatre, Royal Holloway, University of London.

Gareth Griffiths, Chair of English, Culture & Communication Studies, University of Western Australia.

Alamgir Hashmi, poet, scholar & editor, Pakistan & USA.

Aritha van Herk, novelist and scholar, Department of English, University of Calgary.

Janis Jeffries, Professor of Visual Arts, Goldsmith's College, University of London.

Sue Kossew, Associate Professor, School of English, Media and Performing Arts, University of New South Wales, Australia.

Alan Lawson, Dean of the Graduate School, University of Queensland, Australia (previously, Reader in English).

Russell McDougall, Assoc. Professor, School of English, Communication & Theatre, University of New England, Australia.

Alastair Niven, Chairman of the Commonwealth Writers' Prize Advisory Committee (previously Director of Literature, British Council, UK).

Kirsten Holst Petersen, Assoc. Professor in Cultural Encounters and English, Roskilde University, Denmark.

Chris Prentice, Department of English, University of Otago, New Zealand.

Bruce Clunies Ross, independent scholar (previously Professor of English, University of Copenhagen, Denmark).

Paul Sharrad, Assoc. Professor, English Literatures, University of Wollongong, Australia.

Kirpal Singh, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Angela Smith, Emeritus Professor, Department of English, University of Stirling, UK & chair of the Europe & South Asia panel of judges for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 2006 & 2007.

Helen Tiffin, Professor, English Program, University of Tasmania, Australia.

Gerry Turcotte, Professor of English & the Dean of Arts & Sciences, at the University of Notre Dame, Sydney, Australia.

James Wieland, Adjunct Professor of Communications and Cultural Studies, Curtin University, WA, Australia.

Mark Williams, Professor of English, School of Culture, Literature & Society, University of Canterbury, New Zealand.